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5 Great Romances

JAN/FEB 1989 • VOLUME 7 NO. 1

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Loving Lies

Stephanie Wallinford's secret arrangement with writer Lorna Devon seems safe — until investigative reporter Cord Cantrell enters their lives.

EVELYN M. SERANNE

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If only I'd been home, I thought for the hundredth time, I might have prevented this disaster. Certainly over the past five years I'd gained a world of experience in keeping people from encroaching on Lorna Devon's time. Besides coping with the normal hassles of publishing deadlines and phone calls from anxious agents, I'd learned to shield my employer from both too-adoring fans and a media obsessively intrigued by her success as a romance writer.

It had seemed natural and fitting, when I finished business college at 19, to return to the house to become Lorna's secretary. After all, she had been my friend and mentor for many years, seeing to my education and providing me a home. The services I rendered were small in comparison. Or so they had seemed until now. Over the next few days, I faced an overwhelming challenge. Despite having taken all possible precautions, I was nervous and on edge. Something could so easily go wrong.

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In a sudden release of built-up tension, I threw down my pen and crossed to the window of my tiny office to look out over the carefully tended grounds. The view never failed to prove relaxing. At the moment, I desperately needed its calming influence.

From my vantage point, I could see the California laurels, with their grey-brown bark and shiny leaves. Farther off, the long row of red alders, standing like sentries along the property line, was also visible. A giant broadleaf maple, Lorna's favorite, had been afforded the place of honor in the center of the lawn, while alongside the house, well-planned arrangements of low evergreens were growing. The garden that stretched out from the patio at the rear of the house was hidden from view. I did not need to see it to recall the luxuriant beds of flowers, for I had often stolen out after my work was done to enjoy their beauty.

But when Lorna Devon had chosen her Bay Area property, privacy had been the prime consideration. The house was situated well back from the street, behind a wall of impenetrable hedges, to maintain the solitude her creativity required. Even so, constant vigilance was needed to keep the large, two-story house off-limits to curiosity seekers and the press.

With a sigh, I leaned my head against the sash. For the next several days, cooperation was imperative if Lorna were to continue to be protected. Of course I knew that William, Lorna's faithful friend and family retainer, and his wife Mattie could be counted on. And surely the fervent plea I'd made to Jeff and Francine on their aunt's behalf had been clearly understood. We all would need to be on guard, I'd told them, for a single careless word could spell ruin.

I turned back to my desk again, still railing at the twists of fate. Normally, I should have been the one to answer the

phone, but when "Newsmakers" magazine rang to request an interview, Lorna had taken the call. Far too-easy prey for anyone begging a favor or wanting "just a minute" of her time, she'd been persuaded to meet with their leading investigative reporter. Just when the need for seclusion was most acute, our haven was to be invaded.

Of course I knew of Cord Cantrell. His incisive accounts of meetings with UN ambassadors, cabinet ministers and European heads of state were read around the world. Lorna, while her tales of romance and selfless love had gained her considerable fame and fortune, hardly fit the mold. His choice, then, was puzzling and also alarming. The man's reputation had been built on the ability to reach into his subject's very heart and soul. Suppose he were to pry into our private world?

The man who appeared on our doorstep that afternoon didn't fit the pre-conceived notions of a sharp-featured, hard-bitten interviewer. With his brown hair tousled by the breeze and his tanned face molded into pleasant lines, he looked even younger than his purported thirty years. The tweed jacket and slacks he was wearing gave him an informal air, and for a moment I saw him as sympathetic, almost friendly. The engaging smile he gave me could well have been disarming, had I not caught the look in those smoke-grey eyes. Their direct and penetrating gaze quickly renewed my fears.

"Mr. Cantrell?" I asked, masking my inner turmoil. "We've been expecting you."

He nodded. "You must be Stephanie. Lorna spent a few minutes when I called describing her 'little family,' as she referred to it. You're the one who acts as her secretary and keeps the household running smoothly. With you in charge, she told me, she hasn't a qualm about devoting all her time to her work."

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The smile deepened and the merest hint of a dimple appeared in his cheek. I could understand his success with all those heiresses and movie queens. But I wasn't going to be taken in. "She probably neglected to tell you how she's raised me since I was eight. When my mother died, Lorna brought me to live with her. If she's received any benefits, they are insignificant compared to what she's given me."

That, I hoped, would set the tone for what the family intended for him to discover in the next four days. To a sophisticate like Cord Cantrell, Lorna Devon's highly romanticized tales, where virtue and honor always triumphed, might seem foolish. He must be convinced that warm-hearted, caring Lorna believed in what she wrote.

As if on cue, Lorna appeared in the hallway behind me. She was wearing one of her "house dresses" — a long, flowing creation of lavender chiffon, with mandarin sleeves and a graceful V-neck. The salon operator had taken extra care with her hair; a soft fluff of ash blonde curled delicately around her face, accentuating its plump heart shape.

"Mr. Cantrell! How delightful at last to meet you." Cord took her extended fingertips. Her head tilted to one side, she gazed up at his darkly handsome face. "My!" she exclaimed. "I hadn't expected someone so young." I only hoped that Mr. Cantrell's homework had been extensive enough to realize that for Lorna the words were not coquettish, but part and parcel of a straightforward personality.

At least his acknowledgment of her welcome was polite. "I hope having me around doesn't get to be a bit old after a few days. Since I'm anxious to give my readers some insight into your daily schedule, I'll try not to intrude on your routine any more than is necessary."

I grabbed at the opportunity to direct his investigation. "Perhaps you'd like to ob-

serve for a day or two," I suggested. "Then I can answer any questions you might have."

Lorna, ever trusting, didn't see the danger he posed. She chose to ignore my warning glance. "You wouldn't be intruding at all. Please do feel free to ask anything you like — of Stephanie, of me, of any of our family. The house is open to you, Mr. Cantrell. Or may I call you Cord?"

As always, her manner was ingenuous and ingratiating. I knew his answer would be affirmative. "Cord is what all my friends call me," he said. "I hope we're going to be friends."

Lorna was completely captivated. Delight showed in the dazzling smile she gave him.

"Miss Devon has planned dinner at home tonight," I broke in. "The other members of the household will be present, and you will have an opportunity to meet them and talk informally. We generally dine at half past seven. Perhaps in the meantime I could show you the house and grounds." Focusing my eyes on Lorna, I added, "Miss Devon generally spends the time before dinner going over the day's work, so that it is ready for typing in the morning. I'm sure she'll excuse us."

Lorna blinked her azure eyes, but her answer was firm. "Rewriting is one of those nasty little chores that must be done. It wouldn't be fair to my readers to give them anything less than my best effort." She smiled up at him again. "You do understand?"

"Of course. Until dinner, then."

I breathed a sigh of relief as Lorna floated up the stairs to her quarters. "Perhaps you'd like to see the gardens first, while there's still light," I suggested, indicating the French doors off through the living room. "Lorna is especially proud of her climbing roses. William, her handyman, does the heavy work, but Lorna tends the

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flowers herself."

He followed me onto the patio. The planters lining the flagstones were alive with blossoms. "Lorna prefers an old-fashioned garden — sweetpeas, four-o'clocks, nasturtiums, cosmos," I told him. "My favorites, though, are the spring flowers that have just finished blooming. Especially the yellow daffodils. Out back, Lorna's even started an herb garden. There's no substitute for fresh basil and rosemary in her recipes, she says."

"A woman of varied domestic as well as artistic talents, I see. And an astute business woman, as well."

I turned quickly, expecting to catch a glimpse of cynicism. If Cord meant to be mocking, it didn't show in the curve of his firm, wide mouth.

"One needn't give up one's femininity in order to succeed," I answered. Here he'd granted me an unexpected opportunity to lead his thoughts into channels I saw as safe. I seized upon it. "That's the message Lorna is sending to women through her books. She firmly believes that women should develop their abilities to the fullest, but they should never lose sight of the fact that their greatest challenge lies in being keepers of the hearth."

"That's a line from her latest novel, isn't it? You see," he added gently, "I did read several of her works before I came on this assignment."

My face reddened. He'd felt my antipathy. He must not learn its true source. Hurriedly, I made amends. "I knew you would have made yourself familiar with Lorna's writing. Your personality profiles all show your attention to research."

He grinned. "So you've been doing some homework, too."

I nodded. "That's how I know that Lorna is not your usual choice of subject. Please give her a fair hearing, Mr. Cantrell." My voice was unsteady. "You must understand that Lorna's books are a re-

flection of her very nature, of her positive philosophy."

"Are you also a believer, Stephanie?"

"If you mean do I believe in goodness, in caring, in love without expectation of reward, then yes. And Lorna's a perfect example. Besides taking me in, she brought Jeffrey and Francine Scott, her sister's stepchildren, here to live after her sister and husband were killed in a fire. There is something to be said for that kind of compassion."

By now we had reached the trellised walkway with its budding Paul's Scarlet roses. Across the green lawn stood a twisted corkscrew willow. Beside it, to catch both morning sun and afternoon shade, a white wrought iron bench beckoned invitingly. The spot was my favorite, my personal refuge.

The slight nod Cord gave as we seated ourselves indicated he'd heard the Scotts' story. "Yet, with all Miss Devon's obvious devotion to home and family, she never married," he mused. "I wonder why."

Suddenly I was angry — with him, and with myself for having brought him to my private sanctuary. "Since you seem to have delved so deeply into Lorna's personal life, I'm surprised you hadn't also ferreted out that story. Lorna was engaged once, to a promising young engineer. Shortly before the wedding, he died in a tragic accident."

"And there was never anyone to take his place."

"Is that so impossible for you to believe? That a love between two people could be so strong that no substitute could ever replace it?"

"In my business there is little time for developing attachments, especially long-lasting ones," he answered. "Anyway, it doesn't matter how it seems to me, Miss Wallingford. What I'm after is what seems right to Lorna."

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made me realize I must be more cautious. He was feeling my antagonism. Given his nature, he'd be only more determined to delve into Lorna's life, past and present.

"I'm sorry," I said stiffly. "It's just that Lorna has been buffeted over the years by a series of personal tragedies. The memories are still painful to someone of her sensitivity. If you could avoid asking her directly about events that caused her such tremendous suffering, I shall be glad to fill in any details you need."

His face gave nothing away. "Certainly my aim is to give my readers an interesting, informative and honest account. I'm not out to hurt Miss Devon in any way. Whatever help you can give me will be much appreciated." His grey eyes challenged me. "I have always found, however, that my best source in understanding my subject is the subject himself."

As usual, Francine was the last to arrive when we gathered in the living room at seven for cocktails. She was dressed more formally than the occasion called for, in a striking emerald chemise. Her auburn hair was smoothly swept away from one side of her flawless oval face, only to fall in a carefully arranged cascade down the other. My own short, dark locks, I thought ruefully, were hardly a match in either style or glamour. Pausing in the doorway only long enough for effect, she moved across the room toward Cord, her subtly painted lips parted in a half-smile.

"My sister, Francine," Jeff explained unnecessarily. He had been typically punctual—and cordial, as he'd introduced himself to Cord, after giving me one of his embarrassingly intimate glances. Lorna herself had often remarked on how her sister's stepchildren resembled one another. Their common heritage was apparent in the full, slightly petulant lips, the straight, slender nose and attractively heightened coloring.

"Sorry to be late." Francine's low, husky voice held a touch of breathlessness. "The traffic . . . and just when I was hoping to make a good impression on our guest. Please forgive me, Mr. Cantrell." Her upturned gaze held his.

Cord's smile indicated that forgiveness, if necessary at all, had already been granted. "The name is Cord." He held out his hand, and Francine slipped her fingers into it.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," she said. Despite myself, I grinned. My careful maneuvering to keep Cord distanced from Lorna during the evening was hardly likely to be necessary. I breathed a silent thanks as dinner was announced.

The oval table had been covered with a cloth of creamy beige, accented at intervals with silky threads of palest green. The china and silver Lorna had chosen, while semi-formal in design, also reflected her innate taste. Padded walnut chairs and subdued indirect lighting only enhanced the pleasant atmosphere, making me all the more aware that the easy flow of conversation could cause an inadvertent slip of the tongue. Despite the surface congeniality, I remained alert.

"You mean," Jeff exclaimed at the end of one of Cord's stories, "that the ambassador didn't realize what was happening?"

Cord shook his head. "Most of our overseas representatives are no more than political appointees. This one hadn't even taken the trouble to learn the rudiments of the language of the country to which he was assigned."

Silently I gave Jeff good marks. However I might feel about him personally, in his role as host for his aunt he'd done a splendid job of steering the conversation into safe channels. Cord had been kept busy regaling us with tales of his other interviews. And, short of actually batting her big green eyes, Francine had urged him on as well, leaving me with little to

do.

Along with the others, I'd become enthralled with Cord's behind-the-scenes glimpses into his work. And I'd gained a grudging respect for his integrity. What I had seen as an overzealous desire to highlight his subject's flaws was to him no more than a fair appraisal.

"Though Miss Devon, here, makes up her characters," he said when I challenged him on it, "she'll tell you that for them to be accepted as real, they must be complex." He flashed Lorna a smile. "Each of us has imperfections — not all of them as charming as those of Miss Devon's heroines. What I choose to present is a living, breathing human, complete with faults and frailties, so that my readers see a whole individual."

"Of course no one is perfect," I argued, "but why concentrate on that?"

"Why not?" Francine asked. "To my mind, Cord is doing a service by exposing the character flaws in our public officials." Her smile was designed to flatter.

"But to lay bare to the world a person's every foible . . ."

This time Jeff took up the gauntlet. "It comes with the territory, Stephanie. Those who seek the limelight know they take that risk. Besides, they are seldom hurt by it. Today's world thrives on tales of the peccadillos of the prominent."

Cord grinned. "Even Lorna's books contain some pretty nasty villains. Their depravity is also a fact of life."

"But those antagonists are painted in a darker-than-normal hue as a point of contrast," Lorna broke in. "The vast majority of people are good. At least that's been my experience."

"Lucky you," Cord answered. "I hope you never have occasion to lose that belief." Perhaps if his response had been less patronizing, I would have conceded that I'd placed too much emphasis on what I saw as negative in his interviews.

Though the stories he told were intriguing, my constant watchfulness made the evening interminable. I was glad when, after coffee in the living room, Cord announced he had several preliminaries to attend to before he began work in earnest in the morning. Francine, not one to let lack of immediate success discourage her, walked to the hallway with her arm drawn through his, offering to send up more coffee later. I translated her "send" as "bring," and thought that Cord must have, too. I heard him answer that mental exercise was the only stimulant he'd need to keep awake.

The sound of his footsteps echoed on the curved wooden staircase. Then I heard the determined click of Francine's high heels crossing the entry hall.

Jeff's eyebrows went up. "Well, it's just the first evening. Give her time," he said with a sardonic smile. "Though I can't say that I blame her. He's just the kind the girl falls for in your novels, isn't he, Aunt Lorna? Rugged, decisive, a bit overpowering."

"Yes," Lorna sighed. "And he's so good-looking."

"He's also, when it suits his purpose, charming and ingratiating," I snapped. "Remember, he's come for a story. We have to be on our guard every moment."

Lorna looked stricken. "Of course, you're right, dear. I keep forgetting."

"It's only for a few days," I answered more gently. "You'll do fine. Besides, I'll be right in the next room. I've thought up all kinds of excuses to be in and out of your office during his sessions with you. Anyway, if you start with some of those stories about your early days in the business, he'll be so interested he'll probably forget to ask questions."

Lorna was the one weak link in our united front. If Cord struck on a forbidden subject, she was too honest to think of dissembling. "Still," I told her, "you'll want

to be well rested. The best thing right now is to get a good night's sleep."

She nodded vaguely; fear still shadowing her eyes. "Perhaps you're right. I'd better say goodnight."

"Don't worry." With as much conviction as I could muster, I added, "We're not going to let anything happen to Lorna Devon."

"Correction," Jeff said once Lorna was out of hearing. "We're not going to let anything happen to the Lorna Devon legend."

"Is there a difference?" I asked. "Lorna is a legend. If Cord Cantrell destroys it, he'll destroy her as well." My hands were clenched.

"Hey! Back off a bit," Jeff warned. "You could just make Cantrell suspicious. I say we keep a watchful eye, but from a discreet distance."

"I suppose you're right," I sighed.

"Of course I am. Anyway, Aunt Lorna's a lot tougher than you seem to think. She's not about to break, knowing what's at stake. You can bet she's no more anxious than the rest of us to give anything away to Cantrell that could put an end to her cozy way of life."

"That's not the reason she agreed to this charade, and you know it! Her concern is for her fans — the people who believe in what she writes."

"Okay, okay." A hand reached up to trace the outline of my cheek. "What say you stop worrying about Lorna for awhile and think about me." His fingers began to trail down to my throat. "About us," he whispered.

The "me" was more accurate, I knew. I had to admit that Jeff had a polish and charm that was beguiling. One really couldn't blame him for using it, since it got him the things he wanted. For the last several months, he'd claimed he wanted me. Perhaps, as he insisted, it was because we had lived so long in the same

house that I couldn't think of him in a romantic light. But for whatever reason, the spark just wasn't present.

For Lorna's sake as well as his, I didn't want to hurt him. I moved away, gathering up coffee cups and ashtrays as my excuse. "As long as Cord Cantrell is in the house, I just can't think of anything else."

"Does that mean when he leaves you'll reconsider?"

I straightened from my task, and his arms enveloped me from behind. His voice was husky in my ear. "If that's so, I'll give him short shrift."

"Jeff! We've got to appear helpful and friendly. Don't do anything that might make him suspicious."

My eye caught a movement near the door. I twisted away from Jeff's embrace and stood facing Cord Cantrell across the room. My heart started to race. How long had he been standing there? How much

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had he heard? And what must he be thinking?

If he knew the moment was awkward, he gave no sign. "I neglected to ask about the time for tomorrow's meeting. Is nine o'clock too early?"

Surprisingly, my voice sounded calm. "Lorna generally starts work then. That would be fine." He nodded, his eyes holding what seemed to be an appraising look. "Then I'll see you in the morning."

"Mr. Cantrell!" I called as he turned. "There's no set time for breakfast. Come down any time after seven, and the maid Mattie will get whatever you need. The little nook just off the kitchen."

"The glassed-in sunporch overlooking the mountains to the east?" No wonder his accounts were so vivid, I thought. His faculty for registering detail was apparent. All the more reason to pick and choose what he should see.

Using Cord's interruption as an opportunity for escape, I picked up the tray of cups I had gathered and headed for the kitchen. My thoughts were in enough turmoil without a further encounter with Jeff.

Cord was already halfway through a stack of pancakes and sausage the next morning when I arrived downstairs at seven-thirty. I hadn't expected him to be quite so early. Giving him a smile and as cheerful a good morning as I could muster; I chose a seat at a right angle to his. With a false brightness, I nodded at the black-inked notes on the lined pad before him. "You're ready with your questions, I see. Will you be using a tape recorder as well, or do you rely on a handwritten transcript?"

"Neither. People find having their words recorded off-putting, I've discovered. That produces a stilted interview. I find that working without a written script gives me more leeway. The discussion

that develops is relaxed and far more telling than any pre-planned text could be." My next question he anticipated. "I keep the interview on course by outlining my major thrust and then committing the lead questions to memory."

"But then you haven't any record except what's in your head. Don't your subjects ever claim to have been misquoted?"

"I have a pretty good ear, so that when I write the article the quotes are verbatim. I come away with an overall impression, and that's what I give my readers. While the people I write about may not be completely pleased with the results, no one has seen fit to object. It's difficult to deny the truth. The truth," he emphasized, "is what I'm after."

A shiver went through me. The truth could hurt Lorna, whose only aim was good. She stood vulnerable to the attack I was sure Cord intended to make, and at this late date, I could think of no way to stop him. My only hope was to keep him away from her.

I was pulled from my thoughts abruptly. Embarrassed, I apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cantrell. What did you say?"

"I asked if you always subsist on toast and coffee for breakfast. I noticed you didn't do too well at dinner last night, either. You hardly touched the leg of lamb and skipped the peach mélba entirely. Don't tell me I spoil your appetite."

He did, of course, though I wasn't about to admit it. Better to ignore the barb and concentrate on subtle hints to direct his forthcoming interview. "Lorna tells some fascinating stories about her beginning years as a writer. You must ask her about her struggles to find an agent. They all said the same thing: her heroines were too good to be true, and novels like hers would never sell. Did you know it took almost two years for her to find a publisher who was willing to take a chance on her?"

"I'd heard. It took even longer, though, for her to become a real success. The romance novel seldom even rates a review, yet Lorna's last two books have hit the best seller lists. That's where I plan to concentrate my article."

Involuntarily, my fingers tightened around my cup as he continued. "In *Charlotte*, her latest, she's managed to probe the heart of her young heroine as few authors do. I'd like to discuss in detail how the character was developed."

With his eyes directly on me, it took every effort of will not to betray my misgivings. I forced myself to control the muscles in my face. Was it my imagination, or were those unfathomable dark eyes watching my reaction? Even if his motives were no more than he'd outlined, a few minutes with Lorna would surely arouse his suspicions. That mustn't happen.

I made a point of checking my watch. "Lorna usually gets up about now, but with such a busy morning ahead perhaps I should see that she's awake." I whisked the plate of toast I hadn't quite finished to the server before he had another chance to comment on my eating habits. "See you later," I said, forcing a smile. Once outside the sunroom, I fairly raced up the stairs to Lorna.

At nine precisely, Cord opened the door of my tiny office. I was ready for him. "Lorna's not feeling well," I said. "When I went up she was making a valiant effort to get dressed so as not to disappoint you. She's like that, you know. It was obvious, though, that she ought to be in bed. Finally I convinced her that, under the circumstances, you wouldn't expect her to meet with you today."

If he thought Lorna's illness was manufactured, his expression gave nothing



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away. I dangled the carrot I hoped would tempt him. "Lorna was concerned about any delay this might cause you. When I told her that you'd intended to discuss the character of Charlotte with her, she suggested that I might help by going over the biographical sketches she created before she began the book."

A hint of doubt crossed his face. I added more persuasion. "Since Lorna dictates her story outlines and preliminary notes to me directly, I have an opportunity to see first-hand how she goes about constructing her novels. Sometimes I have the feeling that I'm more aware than she of the myriad and complex details she brings together in fashioning one of her tales."

That seemed to be the clincher. Cord reached for the chair next to the desk. He straddled it, resting his arms on its low, laddered back. "Okay," he said. "Suppose you let me see what you've got. As I read, I can ask questions."

Reaching up to the shelf over my desk, I handed Cord the three-ring binder that held the research notes, character sketches and story outline for *Charlotte*. He proceeded to examine it page by page. With penetrating observations and astute questioning, he probed the inner workings of the novel.

"Then," he challenged at one point, "granted that Charlotte's personality and temperament were such that she would have been willing to marry Mac to save her father, why did she run away afterwards? It's a little far-fetched, don't you think?"

"Not really. By that time, she'd discovered she loved Mac and felt she'd played him falsely. Considering her upbringing, her actions were only logical. At least," I added a little wickedly, "Lorna's fans thought so."

"The willing suspension of disbelief." Cord's tone left the impression that he was not convinced.

The two of us, in working our way through the notebook, had become completely absorbed. Neither of us noticed Francine, poised in the doorway, until she commented, "So here's where you've spirited Cord away."

Today her ensemble was even more effective than the cocktail dress she'd worn last evening. Her modest shirtwaist only served to accentuate the soft curves beneath, while the graceful folds of the bias-cut skirt pointed up her slender waist. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a lime green ribbon that matched her outfit. The style was little girl; the result was devastating. For the first time that day, I was conscious of my plain blouse and utilitarian brown slacks.

"Don't tell me you plan to keep Cord working right through lunch, Stephanie." Francine smiled, though that didn't soften the warning she was sending.

I glanced at the clock and then, chagrined, at Cord. "Sorry. I didn't realize it was so late. It's just that creating people and events out of whole cloth is such a fascinating business, I sometimes get carried away."

"I'm the one who should apologize," Cord answered, rising. "This morning's material is just what I was hoping to find. In fact, I don't think it could have been more helpful had it come from the author of *Charlotte* herself."

My face flushed. "I was only too happy to assist."

"Mattie's made a spinach souffle. One mustn't keep that waiting, you know," Francine said, slipping her arm through Cord's. I watched, torn between annoyance and relief, as she led him away.

Lorna kept to her room, and Jeff was out, so there were just the three of us at the table for lunch. Francine, in that engaging way of hers, seized the conversation. Her barely veiled message was clear: I'd had my chance with Cord; now it was her turn.

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Cord was soon replying in kind to her flirtatious sallies, while I sat by dumbly. I followed the repartee at first, thinking to contribute. Finally, I gave up. Neither seemed to notice as I withdrew into my own private world. If Francine's flirting helped keep Cord away from the truth, I consoled myself, I should be happy.

Coffee was being served when my brain again began to register the swirl of words around me. "But interviewing me would be working," Francine was saying. "Besides, I saved this afternoon just for you." Her expression was such a mixture of pleading and regret, I assumed that, like all others, Cord would soon be persuaded to enter into whatever she'd planned.

I was wrong. He shook his head. "You have no idea how you tempt me, Francine. Unfortunately, I must get this morning's notes typed while they're fresh in my mind. What Stephanie gave me is too important to my story to allow it to grow stale."

For the first time since we sat down, I felt included in his smile. The feeling was fleeting. He turned again to Francine. "Would you be willing to exchange the trip to Land's End now for dinner and dancing tonight? Be warned, though," he teased, "I intend to ask questions."

"Just what would you like to know?"

"Oh, personal things, such as whether you prefer your men to send you flowers or candy."

"Oh, flowers, definitely. Candy is so fattening." Francine, having won, laughed. "That was too easy, Cord. You'll have to think up harder questions than that."

Cord's brows went up wickedly. "Don't worry; tonight I'll be much more demanding."

My disheartened reaction to his banter surprised me. "If you'll excuse me," I said, rising, "I think I'll go look in on

Lorna." Not even stopping for an acknowledgment, I left them.

It could have been the power of suggestion, but Lorna, lying on her queen-size bed, actually did look unwell. Without her usual careful makeup, her skin was lusterless. Tiny lines, although few for a woman of middle years, were clearly etched across her brow. Her mouth had a drawn, parched look. She stared up at me through eyes that were faded and dull. "What happened? Is it safe?"

To me the question wasn't ambiguous, since "it" was uppermost in my mind. Our secret, at all costs, must be protected. Even a year ago, when she had wanted to publicly announce the truth, I'd dissuaded her. A confession now would come far too late. Silence had to be maintained.

"Cord said my going over the notes of *Charlotte* with him was almost as helpful as an interview with you."

"Then maybe I won't have to talk with him at all."

I smiled encouragingly. "Not for long, anyway. We'll let him believe you're still confined to your room for the next few days. Then, so he doesn't suspect that avoiding him was deliberate, we'll let him meet with you here."

Lorna's face once more took on its haunted look. "You mustn't worry," I encouraged. "You'll still be too weak to talk long, and I'll be hovering solicitously to see that he doesn't tire you."

I watched anxiously, hoping to see her pallor disappear. Her indisposition was meant as a ruse, but now I was becoming concerned that the illness was all too real. I reached for a pillow that needed fluffing. "Try to take a nap this afternoon," I suggested. "A little rest will be good for you."

"Rest? From what? You know lately how it's been! Oh, Stephanie, I feel such a fraud, lying here." Her eyes showed signs of becoming watered by tears.

My arm went around shoulders that quivered. "Well, we *do* have a deadline to meet. If you really think you'd feel better working, I could sneak up the latest chapter of the new book. I just finished typing it yesterday. You could mark the scenes that need tightening and any passages you don't think read smoothly. If you feel up to it, that would really help."

As I expected, she rallied to the word "help." I slipped off to my tiny workplace, pausing only long enough to listen for the sound of Cord's typewriter in the library opposite Lorna's office. Reassured that my movements wouldn't be heard, I grabbed up the folder from the bottom drawer of the desk and made my way back to Lorna.

I moved about her room, straightening the top of the pink-flounced dressing table, moving the tufted chair, and talking all the while. Finally, she seemed more her normal self. I left her then, contentedly propped up in bed, reading glasses, draft and violet pencil in hand.

The house was quiet. Knowing Francine, I was sure she was at the beauty salon gilding herself for this evening's date. Jeff hadn't returned. Though the sound of typing could no longer be heard, I assumed that Cord was still at work in the library.

For the next few days, I thought — as long as Cord was present — there would be little opportunity to add to the new book, but I could spend some time on research. The references I needed were part of Lorna's personal collection, and were kept in her office. I could easily work in there.

Like it or not, digging for facts is nearly as large a part of story writing as it is of non-fiction. Nothing except outright poor writing will turn away a reader more quickly than to catch the author in a careless misstatement of fact. Fortunately, I enjoyed the researching and had taken it

on for Lorna soon after I began working for her.

Lorna's office, next to the space I occu-



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pied, was large enough to accommodate the tools indispensable to a writer as well as a sizable collection of gifts and awards garnered over the years, yet still retain its uncluttered look. While my own desk faced a wall, freeing me of distracting influences, Lorna had hers beneath the window, claiming the view gave her inspiration.

On the shelf to the left of her work area, I found the book on wild birds that I needed and was soon absorbed. It wasn't until the tree outside the window began to cast a shadow across the desk that I looked at the clock. Five-thirty. Mattie would be starting dinner. Had anyone thought to tell her Cord and Francine would be out, I wondered? It was hardly up to a house guest to do so, and Francine might not have remembered. I decided to make sure. I shoved the book and my notes into a drawer and made my way to the rear of the house.

Mattie, broad shoulders hunched, was sitting on one of the straight-backed kitchen chairs. It wasn't until I came nearer that I saw the towel, rapidly staining, wrapped around her hand. My face must have mirrored my shock as I knelt down before her. "Mattie?" I questioned, attempting to keep the panic I felt from registering in my voice. "What happened?"

At my touch, her eyes flickered, then focused. "I'll be all right," she insisted. "It's just a cut. The knife slipped." On the counter was the thin, pointed boning knife she had been using to prepare chicken breasts.

"Let me see." I steeled myself as I unwrapped the makeshift bandage. The puncture was deep, and, from the flow of blood, had reached a vein. There was no way of telling what other damage had been done. Quickly, I pressed the bandage back in place. "I'll get William," I said, standing. "He'll drive you to the hospital emergency room."

She shook her head, her face the same hue as her tight grey curls. "He's gone into town to run some errands for Mr. Jeffrey."

That meant the sedan was gone. Jeff had taken the red Porsche, and Francine would be using the mini I sometimes drove. Desperately, my mind cast around for help. Cord! Warning Mattie to keep pressure on the wound, I dashed to the library and, without ceremony, flung open the door.

Cord was on his feet and heading toward the kitchen almost before I finished my explanation. His calm efficiency was reassuring. He fashioned a pad from another towel and, without removing the original bandage, tied it firmly in place. Seconds later, the three of us were in his rented car and on our way.

Cord, following my tersely worded directions, skillfully wove his way through the rush-hour traffic. Mattie, with me beside her ready to apply additional pads if necessary, lay pale but composed against the back seat.

At the hospital, she was quickly wheeled off to an inner room. After what seemed hours, a young intern came out to explain that some damage had been done to a nerve, and Mattie was being prepared for surgery. He couldn't say how long the operation would take.

Again we waited. Cord paced restlessly, ignoring the reception room's sofa and chairs. Finally he disappeared down the hall, returning a few minutes later with two paper cups containing machine-dispensed coffee. He handed me one as he sat down beside me. Despite my concern for Mattie, a corner of my brain registered that he had remembered I used cream.

Though we didn't speak, our minds were attuned, for when I placed my half-empty cup on the table and reached for my purse, Cord shook his head. "Jeff's going to tell Mattie's husband. William should be here soon. I asked Jeff to apologize to

Francine about tonight's dinner, too, while I had him on the phone." I nodded, and the two of us sat side by side in companionable silence.

William, looking aged by fifteen years, arrived just as the surgeon pushed his way through the double green doors leading off the emergency room. Cord and I flanked the older man in support as the doctor delivered his diagnosis.

"The surgery was without complications, and the wound should soon heal. With the proper exercise, her hand will be as good as new."

"When can she come home?" was William's anxious question. "Can I see her?"

The doctor smiled reassuringly. "To answer your second question first,—Mr. Biddle is it?—she'll be out of recovery in a few minutes. As soon as she's settled in her room, she can be allowed one visitor. As for leaving the hospital, I'd prefer that she stay a day or two, just as a precautionary measure. This has been quite a shock to her system."

Visiting hours had officially ended, but the sympathetic floor nurse allowed us to wait with William while Mattie was put to bed. Then Cord and I said our goodnights and walked out into the darkened parking lot.

There had been no thought of jackets or coats when we had rushed from the house. By the time we reached the car, I was shivering. Cord warmed the motor and flipped on the heat. "What we both need," he said, "is a stiff drink and something to eat." My feeble protests that it was late, that I should get back to Lorna, that I wasn't suitably dressed, were immediately dismissed. The one excuse that might have changed his mind—that there was still time for him to at least take Francine dancing—I couldn't bring myself to mention.

Cord stopped at a quiet, rustic-looking restaurant and, after ordering a bottle of

burgundy and two medium-rare steaks, began asking questions. My tired brain was issuing warnings to be on guard, for his reporter's mind was sure to catch any indiscreet remarks, but I was heedless of the danger. I found myself responding.

"Is Mattie a close friend of yours?" he asked. "I sensed you were especially concerned."

"We've known one another since I was twelve. That's when she and William were married. I've known him even longer. He and his first wife, who died, ran the rooming house where Lorna lived when she took me in."

"Lorna adopted you?"

"Nothing so formal as that. When it comes right down to it, Mattie and William are just as much a part of the family as I. Lorna just simply brought me to live with her, for no other reason than that my widowed mother had been her good friend. At the time, Lorna was still struggling for success, but she fed me, clothed me, sent me to school. That's why I wanted to work to repay her when I was old enough. She sent me to business college so that she could give me a job. I owe her a great deal."

"If there were ever any thought of debt, I'm sure it's long ago been considered repaid." His eyes surveyed me thoughtfully. "Your story is much like that of the girl in Lorna's first big seller. Obviously, you were the inspiration for it. Only a writer intimately familiar with the emotional reactions of someone in that situation could have penned those passages."

His gaze never left my face. "I suppose there is a bit of me in the girl, Susan," I said carefully. "A novelist uses her own experiences with human nature in developing the characters in her stories."

"A case of giving invention the ring of truth by using truth itself?"

"I suppose."

"The town described at the beginning

of the book. That's where you had been living with your mother."

His statement was one that, while I couldn't completely deny it, I wasn't going to confirm, either. "Generally, the locales in Lorna's fiction are a composite. Anyway, you were probably intrigued just because it's so typical of the small towns around the state. You could find dozens like it."

"You said your mother was Lorna's friend. Where and how did they meet?"

Suddenly his questions were making me uneasy. I was thankful that the appearance of the waiter with our salads gave me an opportunity to turn the conversation to less personal topics.

The wine and Cord's charming manner had a relaxing influence. It was a shock to discover I was actually enjoying his company. Our interests proved to be surprisingly similar, and there seemed to be no lack of topics to discuss. Not until the waiter arrived with the bill did I notice the dining room was nearly empty.

Cord sensed the thought that came to my mind as we rose. "We can call the hospital from here if you like."

"Mattie's resting comfortably, according to the night nurse," I told him as I turned from the restaurant's pay phone minutes later. "William was sent home a half hour ago."

"Good. He should get some rest—and so should you, young lady." With his hand on my elbow, he ushered me out the door.

Once more I was grateful for the warmth inside the car. That and Cord's companionable silence as he drove through the quiet streets had a soporific effect. When he brought the automobile to a halt in Lorna's driveway, I woke with a start, guiltily aware that my head had been resting on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I managed, pulling myself up straight. "You've been very kind. Thank you for everything." The words sounded stiff and

awkward.

He laughed. "Including keeping you out until you're dead on your feet."

"At least I'm sure to sleep."

Jeff's keys were on the hall table. Apparently Francine had been out, too. Her wrap was carelessly draped across a chair. It gave me satisfaction to see that Cord also noticed she hadn't waited for him.

Quietly, we made our way up the dimly lit staircase. At my door I turned to say goodnight. His face was only inches away, and I was acutely aware of my quickened heartbeat.

His lips came nearer to claim mine. The kiss, gentle at first, became more demanding as powerful arms encircled me. In the silent hallway, time seemed suspended. My resolve forgotten, my senses spinning, I yielded in complete surrender. Only the warmth of his embrace and his urgent mouth on mine were real. His lips began to rove, to my eyelids, along my cheek, down my throat, inciting my emotions to a fevered pitch. Mindless, I clung to him, returning his passion measure for measure.

Then, against my hair, I heard his whispered "Stephanie." With what was almost a groan, he then released me and walked away. Down the hall his door closed softly behind him, and I was alone.

I stood, not thinking, not moving, conscious of nothing but the tumult raging inside me. Sensations never before experienced had left me confused and disoriented. My oh-so-definite views about Cord Cantrell had not prepared me for this. I struggled to come to grips with the unsuspected ardor he had awakened in me.

Finally, my pulses steadied and my mind was able to function. It was then I noticed that a light still burned in the living room. Slowly, one hand firmly on the banister, I made my way down the stairs. At the door, I reached to turn the switch, only to see a tousled head raise itself from

the green brocaded couch.

"So you're back. William's been home from the hospital for hours." Jeff's exaggeration was an indication of his state of mind.

"We stopped to eat," I told him.

He rose, weaving unsteadily toward me. "The hospital cafeteria wasn't good enough for the high and mighty Mr. Cantrell? I suppose he took you to one of those expensive places along the water. That always impresses."

Of course Jeff had been drinking. It was useless to point out that after the hours of waiting for word from the doctor, neither Cord nor I was prepared for a gala evening.

"And you were the one who was so set against his coming," Jeff continued angrily. "Don't give him anything, you said, but be polite." His hands were on my shoulders, imprisoning me. "How polite were you, Stephanie? Just how much did you deliver?"

Too weary to argue, I answered, "We'll talk about it in the morning, Jeff. It's late."

His fingers dug into my flesh as he issued his ultimatum. "Keep away from Cord Cantrell, Stephanie. Hear me?"

The sudden violence was frightening. "Let me go," I begged. "You're hurting me."

My anguished cry seemed to reach his sodden brain. He released his grip. "You have to marry me, Stephanie. You're my girl. Don't you know that?"

His pleading unnerved me even more than the thinly veiled threats. I freed myself while I had the chance. "Tomorrow, Jeff. We'll talk about it then." I left him and made my way hurriedly to my room.

The events of the evening had left me shaken. Until this moment, I'd been inclined to take Jeff's interest in me casually. Now, I thought my refusals should have been more firm. And what about

Cord? I had been determined to remain aloof during his stay, but that wasn't possible. What was more disturbing was that I no longer wanted to avoid him.

I slept fitfully, waking early and unrested. Aware that even in Mattie's absence, the other members of the household would be wanting breakfast, I hurried downstairs. William, however, was in the sunroom ahead of me, with coffee made and juice and cold cereal set out on the serving table.

The unexpected change of duties had caused him to abandon the blue coveralls he usually donned for his morning chores in the garden. His thin, bony frame was neatly attired in dark trousers and a long-sleeved dress shirt. As I entered, he was busy gathering up an empty cup and bowl. "Mr. Cantrell was down half an hour ago to ask about Mattie," he explained. "Told him I knew my way around the kitchen well enough to fix bacon and eggs, but he said a cold breakfast would suit him fine, since he had an errand to run this morning."

"You've already called the hospital then?" I asked. "How is Mattie feeling?"

"She's fine, Miss Stephanie, though I don't know what might have happened if it hadn't been for you and Mr. Cantrell, getting her to the hospital so quick."

"Mr. Cantrell didn't spare the horses, I'll admit," I smiled.

"The doc'd already been in to see her when I called. She can come home this afternoon." A frown crossed his brow.

"Course, she's not supposed to use her hand for a bit."

"Tell her not to worry—and don't you! My cooking's not in a class with Mattie's, but I can cope until she's better." I grinned. "And tell her I shan't put her cast iron skillet to soak or use her omelet pan for anything but eggs." At that, he smiled, too.

"What time can she leave the hospital?"

I asked, settling myself with my cup of coffee.

"I'm to pick her up at noon. There's plenty of time."

"All the same, you probably have things you want to do before she comes. I can finish clearing up in here and see to Miss Lorna's breakfast."

"Thank you, Miss Stephanie," William answered. "I did think I'd try to get most of my chores done early so's I could stay with Mattie this afternoon. In case she needs anything, you understand."

"And to keep her from doing more than she should," I added in agreement. "I won't trouble her today, while she's settling in, but I'll drop by tomorrow, if that's all right."

"She'll like that, Miss Stephanie. So will I."

By nine o'clock, I'd checked the supplies in the well organized pantry and had the day's menu planned. While Mattie had a seafood aspic ready for the noon meal, dinner would be up to me. Next, I turned to fixing a breakfast tray for Lorna. If Cord were to return early, it wouldn't do for her to be found downstairs.

The second floor hallway was quiet. Francine's door was firmly shut. Jeff, I assumed, was sleeping off his hangover. I tapped lightly on Lorna's door and, at her muffled response, entered.

She was sitting upright against the pillows, a lacy pink jacket over her nightdress. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffed, but I saw a determination in her face that hadn't been there yesterday. "You shouldn't have gone to all the trouble, Stephanie," she said. "I was going to come downstairs."

I was dismayed. "I know how you hate all this subterfuge, Lorna, but it's the only way. Besides, it's just for a few more days. Cord will be gone Friday."

Her chin came up. "I'm going to tell

him. I've quite made up my mind."

Hastily, I put the tray down on the covered round table by the window and, making a space for myself on the edge of the bed, reached for her tightly clenched fingers. "But Lorna," I began.

"Don't try this time to talk me out of it. What I've done is despicable."

"You did nothing except allow your readers to continue believing in the positive force of love. You've let them see that there is room for goodness, and caring, and the other basic moral values still so important to this old world of ours." The words I used were hers. Surely they would convince her.

This time she wasn't to be dissuaded. "Those values include being fair. I haven't been fair, especially with you!"

I shook my head. "How could that be when it was my idea? I'm the one who should feel guilty; but I don't. What we've done has helped, not hurt."

"I know," Lorna sighed. "You explained it all before." Her hand was beginning to relax in mine.

"Don't worry," I told her. "You stay in bed and rest, and leave Mr. Cantrell to me. Everything will be all right once he leaves." The words were spoken with more conviction than I felt, but they had their effect. By the time she finished breakfast, Lorna even looked happy.

I was back in the kitchen, adding the vanilla and brandy to the mousse au chocolat I'd planned for the evening's dessert, when Francine appeared. She held a corsage box in her hand, but even without that evidence I would have known from her face that Cord had made amends for last night's broken date.

"You needn't plan on Cord and me for dinner," she tossed over her shoulder as she made for the refrigerator. "We'll be out."

Disappointment welled up inside me. Romantic fool, I chided myself. How

could you be so stupid? Somehow I'd conjured up one of those intimate scenes with Cord and me enjoying my perfectly prepared meal together. The idea, of course, was ludicrous, especially since the rest of the family was likely to be present.

I ought to be glad, I told myself sternly. Knowing Francine, she'd be too busy furthering her own interests to talk about Lorna. That meant that for this evening, at least, we would be safe. The thought did nothing to relieve my depression. I couldn't forget the man, nor his kiss.

I had to ask. "Cord's in the library at work?"

"Yes," came Francine's proprietary answer, "But I'm sure, outside of the cup of coffee I promised to bring him, he doesn't want to be disturbed."

Having set her orchid in the refrigerator in the space I'd cleared for my mousse, Francine proceeded to set out two cups and a carafe of coffee on a tray. Silently, I handed her the creamer, sugar and spoons, wondering whether the interruption was her idea rather than Cord's. The sound of his laughter a few minutes later as she closed the library door came as my answer. So much for the importance of last night's interlude!

I was still staring moodily at the stove when my shoulders were pinioned by two masculine arms. Jeff's voice, husky and ragged, breathed into my ear. "I was beside myself last night, Stephanie. Say you forgive me. I can't bear it if you don't!"

My body tensed to break from his grasp. Instantly I was released. I turned to speak. One couldn't look on that ravaged face without a feeling of pity. "I forgive you, Jeff," I said.

He must have known I would, for his next words seized on my answer. "Let me make it up to you," he urged. "Go out with me this evening."

Considering that Cord had chosen to spend the time with Francine, there wasn't

any reason for me to say no. Still, I found myself fumbling for an excuse. "Not tonight, Jeff. I wouldn't be good company."

"Then Saturday? Say you'll come Saturday."

I felt I was being swept along a path not of my choosing. My only alternative was to delay. "I'll let you know later, Jeff. Right now I have work to do."

He opened his mouth as though to argue, then seemed to think better of it. "Okay. I can wait," he said confidently. "Eventually, I'm going to turn that 'may-be' into a 'yes.' "

He was gone before I had a chance to protest. Saturday, I told myself, I would make my answer clear and final. Living in the same house would make the situation awkward, but I was certain now I could never marry him.

Jeff must have left the house after our conversation. At least he didn't appear for lunch. Francine, though, arrived on time for once, bringing Cord with her.

When she chose to be, Francine could be charm itself. She chose to today. I soon discovered that I needn't have worried about bearing the brunt of Cord's further interrogations into Lorna's life. In fact, there was little necessity for me to speak at all. Once Cord had inquired about her health, Lorna was dismissed as a topic of conversation. Francine's sprightly, teasing comments and Cord's equally lighthearted replies dominated the conversation. The dialogue could have come directly from the pages of one of Lorna's novels.

There was my failing, I thought unhappily. That kind of sparkling repartee only came to me when I was alone. The witty sallies always arrived later, when I replayed the scenes in my mind. Then all those clever things that should have been said would pour out in an effortless stream. I tried to be consoled with the thought that there will always be those who are better with pen than tongue.

My musings were interrupted as I realized Cord had turned toward me. "What do you think, Stephanie?" he was saying. It was embarrassing not to have been paying attention. I was even more flustered when the quirk of his brow told me he'd guessed I hadn't been listening.

He allowed me to flounder a few seconds before letting me off his hook. "Francine, here, says you get the best out of life only if you decide early what you want and then plan, step by step, to go after it. My own best moments, though, have been completely unexpected, when some unforeseen opportunity opens up and I decide to take a chance on it."

I hadn't previously considered the idea, but offered my own feelings. "Well, I haven't any long-range plans, but neither am I the type who just waits for choice plums to drop in my lap."

"That sounds like a line from one of Aunt Lorna's novels," Francine remarked.

"One of her more recent heroines, I'd guess." Was Cord baiting me, I wondered? Still, I couldn't keep from responding.

"You just said you believed in following opportunity when it presents itself. In a way, that's what Lorna's heroines do. Even so, they never sacrifice principles to achieve their goals."

"In that, at least, we agree, Miss Wallingford," Cord acknowledged. "Then the question becomes what set of principles you choose. Is kindness a better attribute than honesty, for instance, or tolerance more to be admired than truth?"

Francine apparently was no happier with the turn of conversation than I. "Goodness!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea my simple little remark would set off a major debate. Next thing you know, we'll be discussing religion and politics." Her smile for Cord was all forgiveness. It served to change the subject.

"You promised to show me your aunt's collection of family photographs," Cord remarked. "If you've finished your coffee, Francine, perhaps I could see it now?"

As they left the room arm in arm, I remembered too well that when I'd urged Cord to concentrate on Lorna's early life he'd been completely indifferent. I ought to have been more pleased that Francine had accomplished what I couldn't.

Glumly I made my way to my office. At the door I stopped, utterly amazed. On the desk in a tumbler were six perfectly formed trumpet daffodils. I picked up the folded note in a daze. Even without a signature, I knew the handwriting instantly.

"I tried for all yellow," it read, "but the florist had only this bicolor variety left. Anyway, I hope you enjoy them." My heart leaped and my misery vanished. Cord had remembered! I found myself humming as I returned to my work.

In my new-found happiness, I felt sure Cord wouldn't long remain enthralled with an old photo album. I was right. Half an hour later, he came seeking me out.

I should have known how foolish it was to allow his gift to send me climbing back on my emotional roller coaster. It became obvious, once he explained his mission, that the flowers were purely business. "I thought I might talk you into a glimpse at Lorna's new novel," he said. He must have noticed my hesitation, for he added, "A little advance publicity might be good for sales. It wouldn't hurt my magazine's circulation, either."

I wasn't going to let him see the pain he'd inflicted. Like him, I would concentrate on my objective. He might be back to current history, but at least this was an area where I felt fairly safe. "All that's actually firm at the moment are the theme and the basic plot, plus sketches of the main characters," I told him.

"I just want enough to entice the read-

ers—like the blurb on a book jacket."

"Well, I guess there's nothing wrong with that."

"Don't you want to clear it with Lorna first?"

It was just the kind of mistake I'd been afraid of making. I felt my face flush. "Oh, I shall. Though I'm sure she'll agree. Will a couple of typed paragraphs tomorrow be okay?"

"To use as a guide? Fine."

It was a polite way of telling me that the thoughts in his article and the way they were expressed would be his alone. While I might have hoped for a little more flexibility, I really couldn't blame him. I nodded in agreement.

He turned as if to leave. Crazily, I found myself wanting him to stay. Perhaps he heard my silent wish, or maybe he just changed his mind. He swung back to me even before I framed my question. "Were the pictures in the photo album useful?"

His brows went up. "How did you guess I was going to ask about them. Do you happen to know where the early ones were taken? Francine didn't."

"No, but I could ask."

He gave me a searching look. "Don't bother. It's not important."

That was odd, I thought, as he sauntered from the room. If he had also questioned Francine, he must originally have felt that their location was significant. With a shrug, I dismissed the contradiction. Switching on the word processor, I turned my attention to the synopsis of the new novel that Cord had requested.

Resolutely I stayed in my office that evening, not wanting to witness Francine and Cord's departure. The sound of their voices, however, reached me from the hall. I could imagine how they looked: she, bright and vivacious, in one of the striking cocktail dresses she invariably chose; he in a suit that fit both the occasion and his broad shoulders. He would be

smiling down at her as he helped with her wrap. His hands, slowly drawing away from her shoulders, would caress her silky hair.

Chagrined, I bit my lip. Here I was, acting like some lovesick teenager over a man who ostensibly was an enemy. Someone who had the power to hurt those about whom I cared most.

I spent the remainder of the evening determinedly working, but accomplishing little. Nothing seemed to go right: Finally I admitted defeat and went upstairs to check on Lorna. However, no light showed beneath her door. In my own room, I lay awake until I heard the slam of a car door, followed by Francine's tinkling laughter. It was plain that, for her, the evening had been a success. Desolate, I pulled my pillow down around my ears, shutting out the sound.

"I had a hard time keeping Mattie from coming over to cook," William said when I arrived downstairs the next morning. The weather was grey and overcast, and the steaming mug of coffee he had ready for me felt good in my hands. He grinned as I reached for a piece of toast. "She oughta know by now you and Miss Lorna are the only ones up this time of day, and the two of you eat like birds. She worried about our having a guest, but I told her I knew for a fact Mr. Cantrell wasn't fussy about breakfast."

"He'll probably be late coming down anyway," I commented. "He and Miss Francine were out last night."

William shook his head. "He's already up and out. Checking again on that business he had yesterday, I suspect."

Thinking back, I wonder now why I didn't connect Cord's mysterious trips with fact-finding for his article on Lorna. To my mind, as long as he was away from the house, she was safe.

I turned my concern elsewhere. "As

you say, Lorna's not likely to want much in the way of food before lunch. Why don't I just pop over and reassure Mattie that she can—and should—take it easy for another day or two."

"That'd be mighty nice of you. It'll ease her mind. 'Sides, she always enjoys visiting with you. Says you're comfortable, like Miss Lorna." The unconscious compliment gave me a much-needed boost.

William had said the door to the apartment over the garage was unlocked, and I could just go on in, but Mattie spotted me climbing the stairs and was in the open doorway, fully dressed and smiling, to welcome me. It was just as well, for my hands were full with a basket of fresh fruit and flowers from the garden.

"Should you be up?" I asked; carrying my gifts to the scrubbed oak table in the alcove off the tiny kitchenette.

"The doctor only said to rest my hand, not my feet. Anyway, I'm just sitting here reading. Mr. Cantrell stopped by right after breakfast to drop off some magazines. Wasn't that thoughtful of him?"

Right then I was inclined to agree. When Mattie repeated some of their conversation, however, I looked on Cord's call less charitably. Once we had seated ourselves comfortably on the flowered living room sofa, her account of Cord's visit continued. "Wanted to know about the family, he did. Said it'd make good background information for his story. He asked a lot of questions about you, but then I suppose that's because you work so close with Miss Lorna."

My heart pounded. Curiosity about my position here was what I didn't want. Apparently Mattie didn't notice my concern. She went on cheerfully with her recitation. "I told him William could probably tell him more, since he and his first wife knew Miss Lorna even before she made a name for herself with her books."

"Did he talk to William, do you know?"

She shook her head. "Miss Francine came looking for him just then. Said something about remembering the name of the town he'd been asking about. Called after one of those Spanish saints, it was—Santa Teresa; no, Teresita. That was it. Can't figure out why he was interested. Don't remember ever hearing of it before."

Nor did I, and yet the name had a curiously familiar ring. Perhaps I'd heard it mentioned in a news report, or in some forgotten conversation. Well, if Cord were away, I told myself, I could spend the day at work. There was certainly enough to be done, with Lorna's publisher already asking when we would have a completed manuscript to him. Never mind that my thoughts were on a Blue Olds guided by Cord's strong, square hands. Or perhaps, with the gay and ravishing Francine beside him, only one rested on the wheel, with hers nestled warmly in the other. The feelings that mental picture aroused were ridiculous, I knew. He'd chosen to spend the day with Francine, and my caring made me more the fool. Still, that didn't ease my pain. I was doing all in my power to protect Lorna from Cord Cantrell, but I had no defense for myself.

Half blinded with misery, I nearly collided with Jeff in the hall when I returned to the house. "Sorry," I apologized as he steadied me. "I had my mind on other things."

"What you need is some time off," he said. "From the looks of you, one of those lovelorn heroines is giving you trouble." He would have laughed had he known how close he was to the truth. "Forget the job this morning," he pleaded, "and come out with me."

"I can't, Jeff," I told him. "I should work while I have the opportunity. Cord is out with Francine, but I can't be sure how long he'll be gone. They didn't leave

word as to when they'd be back from Santa Teresita."

Jeff's reaction was quick and apparent. Incredulity, apprehension, then anger flitted across his face. "Santa Teresita! Trust my dear sister to give away the game! All she's got on her air-filled brain is making points with Centrell."

He took a deep breath, recovering himself. "I've got to stop them if I can. How long ago did they leave?"

"It can't have been more than twenty-five minutes," I answered. "But I don't understand . . ."

Jeff spoke to himself as much as to me. "The state road is just two lanes, but it's probably faster. I'll have to gamble on that. Francine most likely suggested taking the coastal highway and then heading east. It's more in keeping with her romantic ideas." He looked at me sharply. "Does Lorna know about this?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. No need to worry her . . . yet."

That decided me. If this mysterious trip was a threat to Lorna, I should be there to see that it didn't succeed. "I'm coming, too," I told him.

"You stay here!" he flung over his shoulder.

I saw no reason to be left behind. Grabbing my purse, I dashed out the door after him. The motor was already running when I slid into the seat beside him. He looked ready to do battle, then relented. "There's no time to argue," he muttered, releasing the clutch and heading the low-slung Porsche down the driveway.

Jeff always had a tendency to drive recklessly, but today his weaving in and out of traffic was even more pronounced. I bit my lip, thinking it wiser not to say anything to break his concentration.

When we reached the state road the stream of cars lessened, and I began to relax a little. "How far is it to Santa Teresita?" I asked. "I don't think Lorna's ever

mentioned it." His eyes left the road for an enigmatic glance in my direction. "At least I don't remember," I added. Some of his tension seemed to dissipate. The smile he gave me was that of a man who has had a last-minute reprieve. "Have you been there before?" I asked.

"Once. On business."

Business for Lorna, I wondered? "What's it like? It can't be very large."

"For the area, it's fair-sized. It's the county seat."

"With an ancient courthouse full of dark little offices and musty old documents," was my comment. Jeff didn't answer. Had he been thinking, as had just occurred to me, that Cord was on his way there to look at old records? Of what? Court cases? Land ownership? Civil proceedings? Whatever his errand, I didn't doubt it had something to do with Lorna. Jeff and Francine both knew of the town; perhaps the connection was tied somehow to the Scott family. Why, in all these years, hadn't Lorna ever mentioned Santa Teresita to me?

My mind teemed with questions, but the road was curving treacherously and my previous experience with Jeff's erratic performance behind the wheel kept me silent. We passed a white camper with only inches to spare, pulling back into our lane seconds before a semi came roaring at us from the other direction. Just then, though the glimpse was fleeting, my eye caught a road sign. "There's a detour, Jeff," I said. But Jeff had already spotted the barricade ahead.

We spun onto the gravel road at an only partially reduced speed, dust and wheel-tossed stones leaving a cloud in our wake. After an explosive "Damn," Jeff's mouth tightened into a grim, thin line. Even with the restraint of the seat belt, I had to grip the white leather upholstery to keep myself in place.

The next fifteen miles were a tortuous

series of bumps, dips and unexpected turns. I breathed a sigh of relief when roadside arrows lead us back to the highway. Jeff's foot leaned hard on the accelerator as we shot past the sign that read "Santa Teresita, 5 miles."

"Unless Cantrell stopped somewhere for lunch, there's no way to beat them to town," Jeff muttered. "Our best bet is to head straight for the courthouse square." He seemed unaware that he was thinking aloud. His eyes were fastened on the traffic and the road ahead. Maybe when we reached our destination and he was calmer, I could get him to explain.

Meanwhile, my mind was racing madly. What in Lorna's past was Jeff trying to keep hidden? Her set of standards was so strict that even the harmless deceit she and I had agreed to caused her torment. I couldn't imagine that anything in her background could be so terrible as to need concealing. Was Jeff's violent reaction an indication that it in some way concerned him? Did his strange attitude toward me mean that I was also involved?

We were coming into town. "Keep an eye out for Cantrell's car," Jeff admonished.

I gave up trying to solve the puzzle and did as he asked. For a weekday afternoon, the traffic was fairly heavy. Impatiently, Jeff followed the stream of cars converging on the center of the city.

The courthouse sat in the middle of a block-square expanse of lawn. It was an imposing structure, with ornate double doors set at the top of marble stairs. Apparently the park was the hub of community activity, for there was a bandstand with banners flying from its balustrade announcing a Saturday concert. A few older people were relaxing on the benches along the brick walk, while half a dozen preschoolers had organized a game of tag near a fountain.

Jeff kept to the right, intending to com-

plete a circle of the streets around the building. At the far corner, I spotted the Olds parked near the crosswalk. The car was empty. I started to point it out, but Jeff had already seen it.

"If I can just find a parking space, I might still be in time," he said, but there was no optimism in his voice.

He found a spot halfway down the next block. Paying no heed to his admonishment to wait in the car, I followed him back up the street, practically running to match the pace he set. We had reached the foot of the courthouse steps when Jeff halted abruptly. I jerked to a stop behind him when I spotted Cord and Francine, descending toward us.

Even in my breathless and distraught state, my mind registered the coldness in Cord's bleak eyes as he reached me. "You made it plain that you weren't greatly impressed with my writing style," he said, "but you shouldn't have doubted my investigative abilities, Stephanie. What was your purpose? Were you planning to make a fool of me by releasing your story after my article came out, or did you devise this scheme merely for the thrill of the game?"

I was too stunned at his accusations to think of a reply. The pain around my heart was so great I was hardly aware of Jeff's fingers digging into my arm or of his attempts at an explanation. "Look, old man, no harm was meant. She . . . We . . . did it for Lorna, you understand. If I can just have a few words with you privately, perhaps I can explain."

"No, Jeff," a voice said behind me, "I'm the one who ought to do the explaining. Surely Mr. Cantrell will agree." Pale but determined, Lorna appeared behind us. William, minus his tie but still dressed in the shirt and dark pants he'd worn at breakfast, was hovering solicitously at her side. "Mattie didn't know about Santa Teresita, but William did," Lorna continued. "When she told him where you'd

gone, he came to me. I knew then the past could no longer be hidden."

Her eyes dark with pain, she turned to me. I thought she meant to speak, but no word came. Then, her shoulders sagging, she looked away. I ached to give her comfort as I felt her inner struggle.

Suddenly, with a flash of the spirit that for months had been missing, she straightened to face Cord squarely. "It will be better if you hear the story from me, Mr. Cantrell. I'm ready to tell you everything."

Confused and heartsick, I stood aside as Cord took her arm in a solicitous gesture. "I'd like very much to hear, Miss Devon, but we needn't go into it here. Is there someplace nearby where we can sit?"

"The Royal Hotel around the corner has a private parlor," William volunteered. I gathered then that he had driven Lorna here before.

"I hope they have a dining room." Francine's tone was peevish. "It's almost two o'clock and I haven't had lunch."

"So it is," Cord acknowledged. "We'll have sandwiches sent in."

The look that flitted across Francine's face said that wasn't what she'd had in mind. Obviously, the day's outing hadn't gone as she'd planned. Though she had long been exposed to the dedication of writers, Cord's placing his work first must have been vexing.

I couldn't be concerned with Francine's disenchantment, however. My thoughts were for Lorna. She leaned heavily on Cord's arm, the momentary spark of vitality drained. Whatever disclosure she was about to make weighed mightily on her. I started forward to give her comfort, but Jeff's grasp restrained me. I remember the distinct feeling that he dreaded as much as Lorna the revelation that was coming. Had I known what lay ahead, my own concern would have exceeded his.

After that grueling afternoon was over, my only wish was to be left alone. I needed to assimilate all I'd learned. In the space of a few short hours, my perceptions of life and my relationship with those I'd trusted had undergone a drastic change. My ears still rang with the sound of Lorna's voice in the private dining room we'd taken as she confirmed what Cord had uncovered.

"I was very young, Mr. Cantrell, immature and inexperienced. He was a mining engineer, a dashing college graduate with coal-black hair and flashing blue eyes." Her voice was anguished, remembering. "I was still in school—hardly more than a girl. My parents were concerned. There was too great a difference, they said.

"Finally, they forbid me to see him. I disobeyed. When they discovered my deceit, instead of punishing me, they merely begged me to wait. But that made an elopement all the more romantic."

Lorna's eyes clouded, looking at things we could not see. "We settled here, in Santa Teresita," she continued. "After our marriage, I was just as foolish in my dealings with Stephen as I'd been with my parents. Of course I lost him. We parted in a matter of months, and I never saw him again. I learned three years later that he had died in a mining accident." Her head turned slowly to face me. "Stephen Joyce never knew he had a daughter," she said softly.

A roaring in my ears drowned all other sound. The papered walls of the room seemed to recede. For a moment I couldn't breathe. Joyce. My middle name. With the return of my vision, my mind also cleared, and I knew. I was Stephen Joyce's child. Lorna was my mother.

"That's when you turned to writing." Cord's words had been for Lorna, but his eyes, dark and questioning, were on me.

Lorna nodded. "After the mess I'd made of things, I couldn't go back home. I took Stephanie upstate to Beth Wallingford, my dearest friend. Then I left for the city to find a job typing.

"Of course, I couldn't afford to enroll in formal writing classes. At night I studied the novels of popular writers in the romance genre, as well as the works of great authors, to learn their techniques. On weekends, I wrote. It was difficult—even painful—at times. Finally I began to make a few sales. Though she'd never asked, I was able then to send Beth money to care for my little girl."

With an effort, she continued. "I thought I'd already had my share of tragedy, but that wasn't to be. Within six months of one another, two terrible events took place. I lost my parents, and then Beth died of pneumonia."

Lorna needed a moment to regain her composure. "Life, though, has its compensating balance. I knew the joy of bringing Stephanie home with me, of having my child to raise."

"But you never told her she was your daughter. You never acknowledged her." However soft Cord's words, they were tinged with recrimination.

Lorna leaned forward, her hand reaching out toward him in a plea for understanding. "Surely you know what it is to have a following, Mr. Cantrell. People who accept the truth of what you write. My readers had come to believe in the goodness and strength of character evinced by the heroines in my books. What if they learned how lacking those traits had been in my own life? I was afraid—afraid they'd lose faith in me and my work."

I stumbled from the room and out into the street, unable to check the tears that streamed down my cheeks nor the bitterness that welled up inside me.

At first I blamed Lorna for her lack of

courage, for having denied me the truth. Then I stormed at Jeff, who also obviously knew. Finally, my anger settled on myself. How little I'd ever questioned, always trusting, always accepting what I was told. I raged at my own gullibility.

I must have walked for hours. Eventually the turmoil eased, and I was able to view the situation with a certain detachment. Lorna had seen the dissolution of her marriage as the ultimate failure. Then she'd compounded her error by relinquishing me into Beth Wallingford's care. Though she had acted in desperation, she looked upon her decision as weakness. For her to face her shortcomings even privately had been impossible; no wonder she'd been unable to admit them openly.

Still, I had not been abandoned. She'd paid for my clothes and my schooling all those years I'd been in Beth Wallinford's charge. Although from a distance, she had seen to my welfare.

Then, when the woman I'd thought of as my mother died, Lorna had brought me home. Perhaps she had never called me daughter, but since that time I'd had all the affection, concern and care that any parent could offer. My heart saw clearly that she had given me the love of a mother. There would be those, possibly even Cord, who might not understand that Lorna's greatest failing was in never forgiving herself. I knew then that, given time, I could, and would.

Exhausted, I returned to the lobby of the hotel. I have no idea how long I'd been at the window, staring out unseeing at the darkening street, when Jeff came to stand beside me. Long enough to reason out some of the puzzle, at least. "When did you find out?" I asked him. "Last year, when you began to make a play for me? When Lorna first began to have her problems?"

"I'm sorry, Stephanie. What else can I say?" Jeff's voice was contrite. "I came

upon Stephen Joyce's name accidentally. After some investigation, I confronted Aunt Lorna. She didn't deny it. I realized then that she wasn't likely to leave her money to Francine and me." In a burst of honesty, he added, "I've gotten used to the good life, Stephanie. I saw marrying you as a way to ensure that it continued."

His hand moved automatically to brush across his eyes. "It all sounds so cold and calculating, but it didn't stay that way. I really fell in love with you. Say you believe me," he pleaded. "Say you'll be my wife."

I couldn't do what he asked. My heart was committed. No matter how hopeless, how illogical, I realized that I loved Cord Cantrell.

My face must have given Jeff my answer. His grin was self-mocking. "Well, you can't blame a guy for trying. And who knows, maybe some day?"

I shook my head. He seemed to understand. With a quick brush of his lips on my forehead, he was gone.

The encounter had left me shaken, but that was nothing compared to the ordeal I knew I still must face. However much I shrank from it, I had to talk to Cord. Though certainly not the expose I'd feared, he had information that could hurt Lorna. I needed his assurance that her story would receive a sympathetic telling. I turned to go look for him, only to see him striding purposefully toward me.

It could have been a trick of the lights, which had just come on, but I read in his eyes a casual detachment. His voice seemed to reinforce that impression. "I'm sorry, Stephanie. What else can I say?" Jeff's words repeated. Was that an omen, I wondered?

As he steered me toward a divan hidden in a tiny alcove, I steeled myself. No matter the consequences for me, I had to see this through.

He gave me no chance to speak. "I

thought you knew," he said.

"About Lorna's being my mother, you mean?"

He nodded. "Obviously the Scotts did, though Francine had none of the details. That's why she volunteered the name of Santa Teresita. Your own seeming lack of information I took as just another attempt to keep me from learning that Lorna wasn't all her fans thought her to be. Then, when I discovered her 'crime' was nothing more than a marriage that didn't work . . ."

"But don't you see?" I began.

"Now I do. At the time, Lorna couldn't comprehend that just being in love isn't enough to get you over the rough spots that inevitably develop in a marriage. You need tolerance and understanding, as well as commitment. She learned that later. It's become the underlying message of her novels."

"Then you won't use what you learned today in your article?"

"Lorna agreed that I ought to tell her story after I explained that what I planned to say would only strengthen her testimony. I didn't mention," he added quietly, "that laying the past to rest might also free her to write again."

I was stunned. Seconds ticked by before I could reply. "You . . . knew?"

"Not at first, though after years of modest but steady sales the sudden popularity of her last two books should have been a clue." The grey eyes that held mine were unswerving. "Those two novels were yours, weren't they, Stephanie?"

I nodded reluctantly, and tried to explain. "Lorna's work had always flowed so easily. Then last year she seemed to hit a snag."

"About the time that nephew of hers confronted her with the records he'd unearthed?"

"I guess. Whatever the reason, it was as though the well had dried. No matter how

she tried, her efforts produced no results. It was a classic case of writer's block."

Cord let me proceed at my own pace. He waited, silent but reassuring, while I chose the words. "Lorna's books had intrigued me from the time I was old enough to read them. Then, when I began typing the manuscripts for her, I saw just how she put the pieces together. I wanted to try a story myself. Without telling anyone, I began to write."

He made no move, but I could feel his reaching out to me, encouraging me to continue. "The publisher's deadline for Lorna's next novel was ten days away. We both knew she could never finish her own book in time."

"So you substituted your manuscript for hers."

"Yes. At first she resisted, saying it would be unethical. I gathered a whole arsenal of arguments to talk her into it. No one was going to be hurt, I told her. In fact, it was to everyone's advantage—her agent, the publisher, the booksellers, her readers. Finally, she agreed. My book was published. People liked it. That gave me confidence to write a second, when Lorna's problem continued. Encouraging her to try again after the last book was released didn't work, so now I've begun a third."

"And after that?" he asked.

I knew where his question was leading. Writing had become too much a part of me. I could never give it up. Nor could I continue to live in Lorna's house while I vied for a place in her world. "I don't know," I answered shakily. "I have some money; Lorna insisted on my taking a share of the earnings on the last two books. Maybe I'll travel awhile. They say there's nothing like it for triggering plot ideas." Even to my ears my laugh wasn't convincing. "Imagine a novel with an authentic Tahitian setting and the name of Stephanie Joyce emblazoned across the

cover."

"How about the name Stephanie Cantrell instead?" Cord asked softly. "It has a nice ring. And, besides Tahiti, you'll likely see Thailand, and Tasmania, and even Turkey."

I held my breath, hardly daring to let myself consider his implication.

He spoke again, hesitantly. "Once, right after college, there was a girl. The two of us had good times together. Pretty soon we were dating steadily. I assumed we both wanted a permanent arrangement. When I approached the subject, she made it abundantly clear that I was mistaken. Since that time I've been a loner, making friends and acquaintances, but never letting anyone get close to me. Then you came along. At first I couldn't believe what was happening. After all these years I was sure I needed no one. But I need you, Stephanie," he whispered huskily.

His fingers roughed his hair in a gesture that was both rare and unsure. "I know the setting ought to be more romantic. I should have chosen a better time, with moonlight, and roses, and soft music playing, but this is something that can't wait. Your answer is too important. Stephanie, I'm asking you to marry me."

I had been wrong. Those dark grey eyes I'd thought so cold were warm and alive. In their glow, I felt warm and alive, too.

"It's romantic enough, Cord," I answered, moving into his waiting arms. ♥



In Dreams

Jane Jones had worked for Warren Scully so long that neither of them had noticed a very obvious fact — that they not only complimented each other in the office, but in more intimate ways as well.

ANN SMITH

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June eighth. Jane Jones flipped the calendar over to the new business day, and smiled, remembering her graduation from NYU on that date ten years ago. A lot of water had gone over the dam since then. She pushed the intercom button.

"Amy, did Federal Express get those documents last night for Scully?"

"Sure did, boss!"

Warren Vincent Scully, her boss and sole owner of the conglomerate, Scully Enterprises, was in Madrid this month,

living the good life as usual. Jane wondered where Scully would set up headquarters next. No one ever called him anything but Scully. Except when they called him an international playboy, a wheeler-dealer, a ladies' man, a brilliant financier or a jet-setter. Certainly all of them fit.

From a poor family, Jane had worked her way through college and when she met Warren Scully in Humanities class, she was holding down two jobs and going to school full time. She remembered it as if it

were yesterday.

"My name's Scully," he'd whispered when he'd thrown his body into the vacant seat beside her in the auditorium.

"First or last name?" she'd rejoined.

"Last, but that's all anyone ever calls me. What's your name?"

"Jane Jones."

"Do they call you J.J.?"

"No, just Jane."

Although he'd been young and unpracticed, he'd been a charmer even then. Jane'd been fascinated with him and easily accepted when he'd asked her to go have a soda with him after class. With Scully, Jane never had to worry about conversational lulls. He could talk non-stop about his plans and ambitions, where he planned to be in five years, ten years or even twenty. Somehow he'd never left the impression that he was self-centered, just positive.

To his credit, he had a genuine interest in other people and questioned her about her ambitions; Jane found herself telling him of her rather limited plans.

Thinking of that day so long ago made her smile again. If the truth be known, by the time they'd finished their Cokes, she'd been half in love with him. And to this day, he still had no knowledge of it.

Scully had been easy to love. He was good looking in an all-American boy kind of way. His hair was light brown with just enough wave to tempt a woman to run her fingers through it. His eyes were a deep emerald green and his eyelashes were thick and curled. No doubt he'd read somewhere that direct eye contact was to his advantage because he used that ploy when both talking and listening.

He was also quick-witted, with a keen sense of humor, and no one could deny he was smart. He could sniff out a good business deal a thousand miles away.

That second semester of her sophomore

year and the last semester of Scully's senior year, they'd become a twosome. Nothing romantic, because that wasn't in Scully's plans. But they were good friends. He bounced ideas off her and really listened to her replies. He admired her logical thinking and told her so.

Jane was everything he wasn't. He was an idea man; she was a detail woman. He was fire and brimstone; she was pomp and circumstance. But they complemented each other and found common ground.

"Miss Jones?" the intercom hummed with her secretary's voice.

"Yes, Amy," Jane answered, glad that her reverie had been interrupted.

"A messenger just brought some contracts about a copper mine. Do you want to see them now?"

"Put them with my mail, Amy. I'll look at them later."

Jane released the intercom button. A copper mine. What would Scully think of next? Where did he find out about this stuff? Jane was fairly sure he was sunning himself at the moment with some pretty senorita in the middle of Spain. How did he find time to buy copper mines?

Scully's energy never ceased to amaze her, even though she'd worked for him for twelve years. That in itself had been a fluke. A week before Scully's graduation, a man he'd worked for in the summers had died and left Scully a nice nest egg. Like Jane, Scully had come from a poor family and had worked his way through college. She remembered his enthusiasm when they'd met after class that day.

"This is the beginning, Jane, just the beginning," he'd expostulated.

"It's not a fortune, Scully," she'd cautioned in her usual manner.

"Not yet, but it will be." His green eyes flashed with excitement and Jane had known even then that he was seeing visions she'd never see in her whole life.

He hadn't lied. While she plodded

along in summer school and worked her two jobs, Scully was busy. She didn't hear from him for three months, but when she did, he had an offer that was hard to refuse.

"I want you to work for me, Janey," he'd cajoled.

"Which one of my jobs should I give up, Scully?" she'd asked sullenly, thinking this was another of his pie-in-the-sky schemes.

"Both of them. Here's my plan."

Over the summer, he'd cut a few deals, buying things, then selling them for a higher price. He had an uncanny ability to buy low and sell high; he'd quadrupled his nest egg.

Jane was impressed. He'd rented an office, and needed someone to run it for him, do the paperwork, answer the telephone and set up appointments. The salary he offered was almost double what she was making at both her other jobs and he was willing to pay her tuition and let her go to classes on his time when necessary. It was a deal she couldn't refuse, so she rearranged her schedule and went to work for Scully.

He had his finger in everything and Jane found she was much more interested in his business dealings than her school-work. Every day was a new experience.

But during those first two years, at least he'd been in the office frequently. Jane sighed as she looked at the date again. It had been almost six months since he'd been in the office. Six months since she'd seen him in person. But she kept up with him through the tabloids. With his handsome face, charming personality, Midas touch and social life he was good copy.

Of course, Jane didn't complain; she had a good life. With Scully's salary, she'd completed her undergraduate degree and taken over his office. As his fortune amassed, she had increased responsibilities and subsequent compensation.

When she'd wanted to go back to school for her MBA, he'd footed the bill. Scully was generous to a fault, giving her full credit for his success. When he pulled off an especially good deal, he rewarded her with a liberal bonus.

In the office she reigned supreme. She hired and fired; she decided on salaries, furniture, decorations and office policy. She shopped for new quarters when more space was needed; she automated the records with state-of-the-art computer technology. Mr. Scully could have been a figment of someone's imagination, for all some of his staff knew.

But Jane knew he was real. She talked to him at least once a day, seven days a week. She paid all his bills, both business and personal. She did his taxes, arranged to have his apartment cleaned and decorated, ordered his custom made clothing and had his condo supplied with food and drink when he was going to be in New York. As far as Jane was concerned, she did everything a wife would do except sleep with him.

But their relationship from the very beginning had been aboveboard and upfront. He'd do the grandiose wheeling-dealing and she'd clean up after him. It had worked for twelve years.

Over the years, Jane had amassed quite a nest egg due to her association with Scully. She'd also provided for her parents, allowing them to retire out of the city to a comfy bungalow on the Jersey shore. They both looked relaxed and happy when Jane went to visit. And she'd sent her younger brother to college.

For herself, she dressed in the height of fashion, lived in a pricey upper East Side New York neighborhood in a restored brownstone and felt justified to vacation wherever in the world she wanted.

Although she knew she wasn't considered a beautiful woman, she knew she was reasonably attractive at thirty-two. She

had her auburn hair cut and styled at Elizabeth Arden Salons; she purchased makeup that highlighted her ivory skin and wide blue eyes. Like most women, she agonized over her figure, wishing she had a little less bust or was just a bit taller.

She led an active social life and had orchestra seats to the ballet, opera and Broadway shows whenever she wanted. Her time was her own: she could come in late, leave early, go shopping in the middle of the day if it suited her.

Her female friends were divided on her position. Some envied her freedom and responsibility. A few were jealous of her salary, which was rapidly approaching six figures.

But a few friends criticized her, claiming she was a traitor to the feminist movement, despite her lofty position.

"He uses you like a doormat, Jane," one of her more vociferous friends, Celeste Ralston, complained at lunch at the Russian Tea Room one day. Celeste was an attorney in an almost all male law firm and was very outspoken about women's rights.

"Just because I do everything for him?" Jane inquired.

"Because he can rattle your chain anytime, day or night. He doesn't consider that you might have some sort of life that doesn't center around Scully Enterprises, does he?"

"I disagree," Rebecca Tourney, the third member of the group and a women's clothing buyer for Lord and Taylor, chimed. "I think she has the best of everything. She makes big money and all the decisions for a multi-million dollar corporation. So what if he calls her sometimes when it's not convenient?"

"I never said that he called me when it wasn't convenient," Jane countered.

"You consider Saturdays and Sundays suitable?" Celeste asked haughtily.

"He loses track of time sometimes, I'll

admit. And sometimes he's in another time zone and forgets it's the middle of the night here."

"You're making excuses for him, Jane. I'll bet if he asked you to do his laundry and send it to him, you'd do it!"

The three women laughed. "He's a good guy, I keep telling you," Jane pronounced:

"He's rich, that's about all I can say for him."

"He's honest," Jane added.

Her best friends exchanged knowing looks.

"And you're in love with him."

"Don't be ridiculous! I haven't seen the man in six months, for heaven's sake. How could I be in love with him?"

One glanced at the other. "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Jane clamped her lips together and shook her head from side to side. "I think your imagination has run away with you."

"What are you going to do when he gets married?"

"Scully? You've got to be kidding!" Jane laughed.

"He will, you know, some day. Some woman will insist on it. He can't continue seducing women all over the world and never get caught. His luck will run out one day, just mark my words," her feminist friend predicted.

"I can't see that that would do anything but make my job easier, girls," Jane said with a smile. "Then his wife could take care of his personal finances and his houses."

"And keep his bed warm."

A thoughtful look passed Jane's face, one that was not lost on her two friends. "Yes, that, too."

The conversation turned to business but their words stayed with Jane as she went back to her deluxe office.

What if Scully were to marry? Where would that leave her? Would another

woman accept all that she did for him without raising a fuss?

Job wise she didn't have any doubt about their mutual loyalty to each other. More than once, she'd been offered administrative positions through business contacts. But she'd never considered any of them seriously because of her allegiance to Scully. Face it, Jane, that's not what bothers you. But someone sleeping in his bed permanently, with a legal right to be there, that bothers you.

In her sharply tailored Brooks Brother's suit, Jane twirled her leather office chair around and looked out over the skyline of Manhattan. Thirty-two wasn't the end of the world where romance was concerned. She still had time to find someone to share her life with. Someone, unlike Scully, who wanted her for some reason other than business.

Her friends had been right, she reflected; she couldn't ever remember not being in love with him. And it wasn't as if she didn't try to find someone else. She frequently dated men who were considerate, romantic and fun. She made lots of contacts in her job, had a great many social friends, spent weekends on Long Island and Cape Cod with mixed groups.

One time, several years ago, she'd had a semi-serious relationship with a yuppie lawyer. He'd wanted to marry her and she'd made it to the bedroom door with him before pulling back. She'd liked him well enough, she just hadn't loved him. Not like she loved Scully.

Damn him!

Warren Vincent Scully had everything he wanted. He was a self-made man who had risen from a working class family and neighborhood to hobnobbing with the financially and socially elite. The Midas Man, that's what they called him, and he grinned at the epithet. It was true that almost everything he touched turned to

gold. And what didn't, only he and Jane knew about. Good old Jane. She never said "I told you so" when he made a deal that went sour or invested in something that went bust. She'd just remind him that he could deduct it as a loss on his income tax.

Scully looked at the dark haired, sloe-eyed beautiful Spanish girl beside him on a chaise lounge. Her tawny skin covered with tanning lotion glistened in the sunlight. Erotic notions of how he might spend the evening with the voluptuous woman trekked through his mind.

Better call Jane, he thought. She'd have those papers on the artworks he planned to buy by now. He excused himself to the young lady and went to his suite in the hacienda, wanting privacy for his call.

"Janey?"

"Hello, Scully."

"Something wrong?"

"No." He'd called at a bad time and Jane didn't want to talk with him. The lunch with her friends had conjured up all sorts of thoughts about Scully and her own lack of a love life.

"Did you get the information on the masterpieces I've offered on?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did you think?"

"I think you're out of your gourd, Scully. You don't know squat about art and neither do I. Now I have to hire an expert to tell us if you've made a good deal or not. Why don't you stick to things we can handle easily?"

"What's wrong with you? I've bought paintings before."

"Sorry, I'm having a bad day."

"Anything I can do?"

"From Madrid?"

"I could come back to the States if you needed me, you know that, Janey."

Jane hated it when he called her Janey. It was too friendly, and sometimes, like now, too intimate.

"Forget it. I filed the papers on the copper mine this morning and sent the contracts to your lawyer. Anything else?" She knew she was being curt with him. Sometimes their conversations lasted for an hour. He would tell her about what he was doing, who he was with, what he'd eaten and where, the climate and any other various bits of his life. Today she didn't want to hear any of it.

"No, I guess not. I'll call tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is Saturday, Scully. Wait until Monday, will you?" And she hung up.

Scully stared at the telephone. Jane had never hung up on him before. What in the hell was the matter with her? In all the time they'd worked together, she'd never objected to him calling her at any time. Even when she went on vacation or away for the weekend, she told him where she'd be and the number there.

Instead of rejoining the lovely lissome senorita on the patio, Scully took a shower and put on fresh clothes. He slept alone that night.

Although Jane enjoyed her house in the city, she'd purchased a cozy little cottage on Long Island on the Great Peconic Bay as an escape. When Scully got to her, when she allowed Scully to get to her, she went there for a long weekend. She shopped the local fruit stands and antique shops and dug in the dirt. Her flower gardens were the envy of the neighbors.

She never fought the Friday night traffic out of the city to Long Island; preferring to get up early and drive the roads when there was no traffic. It took her only ninety minutes on that Saturday morning and she was in time for the opening of the Kountry Kitchen restaurant where she stopped to buy some of their fresh muffins.

Later, dumping her paraphernalia just inside her front door, she took off for a

walk along the shore. She was sure that the soothing lap of the Peconic Bay would calm her. But as she strolled along the pebble strewn shore, Scully entered her mind.

She had no reason to be mad at him. None at all. Now she'd have to explain why she was so rude on the telephone. One thing about Scully, he never forgot anything. And she knew him well enough to know he'd demand an explanation. She'd tell him she'd had a headache. Men always believed that, didn't they?

Besides, it wasn't his fault she didn't have a meaningful relationship with a man. Well, not directly, anyway. At lunch yesterday, it was clear that her friends considered his constant calling an inconvenience, when in actual fact, she looked forward to his calls, to the contact with him. Years ago she'd learned to tamp down any pangs of jealousy about him with other women.

And, strangely enough, he seldom talked about the women he caroused with, only occasionally mentioning one of them by name. And none of them ever lasted long. When he moved from one country to another, one project to another, he left the current girlfriend behind, if the tabloids could be believed.

Jane watched the early summer sun climb into the sky, casting short shadows over the small boats and skiffs anchored in the serene bay. She wasn't sure why all of this had come to a head suddenly. She'd known she loved him for twelve years. Maybe her friends voicing it had made it seem so real. And so hopeless.

Oh, to hell with it! She knew Scully would track her down and want an explanation today. While she waited for his call, she'd do something productive. Like paint the Adirondack lawn furniture that had been sitting in her garage since last fall.

Jane was not like other women Scully knew, and her clipped tone yesterday bothered him. She never was petulant or out of sorts, a phrase he remembered his mother using when he was a kid.

So what the devil was wrong with her? He was going to find out, that was for sure.

Using long distance lines as if he were making local calls, he tried the office, her brownstone and her parents' home in New Jersey. When none of the people who answered could shed any light on where she was, he remembered she'd bought a place on Long Island last year. He rummaged through his business papers to find that number.

The telephone rang several times before she answered.

"Jane?" he asked, not immediately recognizing her out-of-breath voice.

"Yeah, Scully."

"Why are you out of breath?"

"I was outside, painting."

"Painting what?"

"For heaven's sake! Lawn furniture." She tried to keep the exasperation out of her voice. She'd promised herself. "Look, Scully, about yesterday before you ask."

They'd communicated for so many years that they didn't need any preliminaries. Each knew what the other was thinking most of the time.

"I wondered what was wrong with you."

"It was just a headache."

"I've never known you to have headaches." There was genuine concern in his voice.

"I don't very often, but I had lunch with a couple of friends and I guess I had one too many cocktails," she said, smiling at his concern. While she talked, she reached for her briefcase and took her daily list out so she could talk intelligently about what he needed to know. "Now, about the copper mines . . ."

"How many cocktails, Janey?"

There it was again, that Janey, that intimacy.

"Three, which is one over my limit."

"A three Martini lunch? I thought they were out of fashion now that they're no longer tax deductible."

Jane laughed. He could always do this to her, take the wind right out of her sails. "It was Mai Tais and it wasn't a business lunch. Do you want to hear about your business or not?"

Scully was relieved to hear that she was all right and things were on an even keel between them again. He shouldn't have interrupted her on the weekend; she'd asked him not to call until Monday and he'd violated her request. He felt an apology was in order.

"Not particularly. I was worried about you yesterday. I can wait until Monday to get an update, if you like."

"Let's cover some things while you're on the line. I think we need a new art expert. If you remember, that last one overestimated what you bought considerably and we barely broke even on the sale."

Scully listened to her and made whatever comments and decisions she required. Although with her efficiency, he had few decisions to make.

"That's about it," she said finally. "We should be hearing next week about the purchase of the computer software company. I'm meeting with the principals on Wednesday."

"You're good, you know that, Janey."

"Sure," she laughed.

"I'm serious. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"But it's fun thinking about it, right?" Jane expected him to laugh as he always did, but he didn't.

"No, actually it's not."

"Are you okay, Scully?" It was so unlike him to be solemn about anything.

"Me? Sure, I'm fine."

"The good life isn't getting to you, is it?"

Scully threw off his melancholy and laughed. "Never!"

Jane smiled at his restored good humor. "I'm taking Monday off. Talk to you Tuesday?"

"Enjoy your weekend. Sorry I bothered you. I promise I won't call until Tuesday."

"Three whole days without talking to you? How will I stand it?"

"You'll manage, I'm sure. Goodbye, Jane."

"See you, Scully."

Jane frowned at the telephone as she hung up. Scully had sounded different. She shrugged. Probably his love life was rocky. He didn't speak Spanish and in all likelihood was having trouble communicating with the señoritas. Served him right.



After her long weekend, Jane's good humor was restored and she was ready to tackle the problems of Scully Enterprises with renewed vigor. She'd used Monday to have the guttering on her cottage replaced and to buy bedding plants for her front flower garden. Amazing what a little gardening could do for the soul. Besides which, she'd had a stern little talk with herself while she'd worked.

Scully was what he was: an international playboy. He liked women and didn't want to be tied down to one. He'd always been like that from the moment she'd met him, and he had no intention of changing.

She'd had a marvelous relationship with him from the beginning, and he'd never pulled any punches with her. It was up to her to find someone to replace him in her affections. With the determination that made the running of Scully Enterprises such a success, Jane promised herself she would renew her efforts to meet a new man. Out there somewhere was someone for her and she'd never find him

if she didn't get back in circulation.

"Miss Jones, Mr. Scully on line two," Amy said into the intercom soon after Jane came into her office.

"Hi, Scully," she intoned when she picked up the phone.

"How was your weekend?" he asked.

"Relaxing. I got a lot of work done, painted the lawn furniture and did some gardening. How was yours?"

"Why do you do that kind of work yourself? Do you need a raise so you could hire it done?" Although he didn't mean it to be, his tone was abrupt.

Jane laughed. "Oh, Scully, you're a real case. I like gardening and fixing up my place."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you need a raise?"

"If I needed more money, I'd give myself one, just like always. What's with you, anyhow?"

Scully didn't have an answer. Even after some soul-searching over the weekend, he couldn't sort out his thoughts. Something about Jane was bothering him. Since he'd recruited her to work for him in the middle of her college career, he'd never even considered the fact that she could leave him, go to work for someone else. But her curt tone last Friday had made him insecure about keeping her.

"Nothing, I just wondered. Uh . . . you're not unhappy working for me, are you, Jane?"

"Of course not! What's wrong with you?"

.He didn't answer. He had no answer. "I'm leaving here on Thursday and going to California. I heard about a guy who's experimenting with artificial sweeteners and needs money."

The conversation turned to business after that. Jane hung up wondering how he could have heard about the man in California while lazing in the sun at a secluded Spanish hacienda. Scully never ceased to

amaze her.

Scully was restless in California even though his cadre of friends and business acquaintances kept him busy. He'd figured out early in life that more business information was available on a yacht or in a country club than in a regulated business office. So it was easy to combine the skill of one with the pleasure of the other.

Scully had absolute confidence in two things: his own ability to make judgments about sound financial transactions and Jane's unfailing proficiency with handling the details.

Over the long fourth of July weekend, as he lay in the sun on his rented yacht off the coast of Catalina Island, he continued to think of Jane. He'd invited a few social friends and a few more business contacts to join him for the holiday, which made a party of over twenty. There were wine stewards and two chefs on board in addition to the regular crew so that everyone's wishes were catered to.

Beautiful, bikini-clad, Californian girls were among his guests. Elevating himself from a prone position, Scully surveyed the deck of the boat, noting one of the women he'd dated during his last visit to California. Seeing her gorgeous body glistening in the sun did nothing for him.

Jane had said she was going to her place on Long Island this weekend alone. Well, she hadn't said she was going alone, he just assumed it. He never asked her about her personal life.

He stood up with a deep sigh. Hell, all he really needed was a new project. The guy with the artificial sweetener idea needed more investors. With just a couple phone calls he could rake in adequate support for the man. In fact, just talking to the people on this yacht would probably do the trick. He was bored being idle in the sun; he marshaled his thoughts and went to the air conditioned lounge. Business

was business. Time to get cracking.

The only time Jane didn't hear from Scully on a daily basis was when he was out on the water somewhere, so it didn't surprise her that he didn't call over the long weekend.

Although she planned a quiet weekend at her cottage, she was asked to a house party in Sag Harbor. She went up for one night and it was there she met Quinn Marsh.

Quinn and Scully were two peas from the same pod with few exceptions. Both were entrepreneurs, but Quinn came from old money and Scully was a self-made man. Quinn's expertise with women preceded him so Jane was cordial, but wary.

As people paired off for the various sports, bridge and eating, Jane and Quinn naturally fell together. She was attracted to his dark hair and warm brown eyes; his personality was less flamboyant than Scully's and Jane found that to be a refreshing change.

Initially, they discussed financial coups, marketing possibilities, investments, trades, and industrial establishments. But before the weekend was over, they touched on other interests of a more personal nature, finding that they shared similar tastes in the theater, food and entertainment.

Jane liked Quinn Marsh. He liked her. She stayed an extra night, and they made plans to have dinner in New York the following week.

On Tuesday morning, Jane's office telephone was ringing off the hook when she got to work. She checked her watch. It couldn't be Scully because it was only six o'clock in the morning in California.

"Jane Jones," she said in her best professional manner.

"Janey?"

"Scully! What are you calling at this

hour for?"

"I couldn't sleep. How was your weekend?"

"Fine. And yours?"

"Okay. You went to your place on Long Island?"

"Yes and no. I ended up at the Shearer's in Sag Harbor." If Scully wanted to waste his money on chitchat, she guessed she didn't mind.

"What was it, a house party?"

"Yes. What'd you do?" she asked since he didn't seem to have business on his mind.

"I took a bunch of people out on a yacht for the weekend. The weather was fantastic. You should've been there."

Jane laughed. "Yeah, sure."

"Meet any interesting people at your party?" he questioned.

"As a matter of fact, I did. Someone you know, actually. Quinn Marsh. We had a good time."

"Marsh?" Scully knew of the man's reputation with women. "He's poison, Janey."

"Did you call to discuss my love life, Scully, or do you have something important to say?" Jane was smiling. It took one to know one as far as she was concerned.

Scully had called for business, but the current topic was suddenly of more interest to him. With humor in his voice, he said, "Let's talk about your love life."

"Let's don't." Jane was sure if they talked about hers, he'd volunteer something about his and she didn't want to hear that. "We've had an offer on that steel fabrication plant in Pennsylvania, a really good one. Shall I sell it?"

Scully could see he wasn't getting anywhere so he started asking questions about the offer. One topic led to another and they talked for another thirty minutes.

"I'm coming to New York in a couple of weeks, Janey. See about the condo, will you?"

"You're coming here in July? I thought you hated the city in the summer," she commented.

"Well, I do, but I've got a line on something and I want to pursue it. Besides, I haven't seen the new offices."

Just after he'd left the last time, she'd needed more space and had leased office space close to the World Trade Center.

"That's true. What day will you arrive?"

Scully named the date and the time of his flight. She promised to have a limousine waiting at the airport for him. She was ready to sign off when he said, "Be careful of Marsh, Janey."

"I'll tell you what, Scully. You take care of your life, and I'll manage mine. Okay?"

Scully was surprised at the sharpness of her tone. He did little more than say goodbye. It sounded as if she slammed the telephone into its cradle. Surely not. Not Janey.

What in the world was wrong with her? Jane pondered as she stared at the headset which she'd replaced with more force than necessary. She pulled a blank legal pad in front of her and began to make a list of all the things she would have to do to get ready for Scully's stay in New York. Have the condo cleaned, arrange to have it stocked with food and drink, get the newspapers delivered again, call the florist and have fresh flowers available, arrange for daily maid service and call his lawyer to alert him. But her thoughts grew distracted. Just where did Scully get off telling her how to manage her life? Who did he think he was? What gave him the right?

To add insult to injury, her phone rang again and it was her women's libber friend, Celeste Ralston.

"Hi, Jane. Hear anything from the Playboy of the Western World?"

"I don't need this today, Celeste."

"Trouble in paradise?" her friend teased.

"He's coming to New York and I'm trying to make plans," Jane stated, hoping Celeste would take the hint.

"Oh, I see, you're doing all your wifely duties. Well, I won't bother you but a moment. How about dinner Friday night?"

"I can't. I have a date."

"With?" Celeste never wasted words.

"For God's sake, Celeste! Quinn Marsh."

Celeste laughed. "Speaking of playboys . . ."

"That's just what Scully said. What's wrong with everyone today? Don't any of you think I can run my own affairs?"

"I take it Scully objected?"

"He warned me off." It wasn't any use. Celeste could always get Jane to tell anything she wanted.

"What a nerve that man has! He beds anyone who has a warm body, expects you to be a doormat for him, and then wants to tell you who you can date. What colossal brass! How do you put up with it, Jane?"

Jane didn't need these reminders at the moment. "Look, Celeste, I've got to run."

"I understand. Maybe we can get together for a drink some evening?"

"I'll call you," Jane ended the conversation as she realized Celeste was right. He did have colossal brass.

Among the various calls Jane got that day, the most flattering was from Quinn Marsh. He wanted to meet her for cocktails after work. She agreed, hugging a secret thought that Scully couldn't tell her how to conduct herself.

As Jane found out that week, Quinn was the perfect escort. He was known in the finest restaurants and given preferential treatment and the best tables. He was also a wonderful conversationalist, had a good sense of humor and was almost too handsome. And he seemed to genuinely

like Jane.

When he took her back to her brownstone after their evenings together, he was circumspect and didn't even try to kiss her. A definite aberration from his reputation. Jane asked him about it on Saturday morning as they sailed out of New York harbor on his yacht.

"You have a reputation for romancing the ladies, Quinn. How come you haven't made any moves on me?"

Quinn smiled at her. "You're not confusing me with your employer, are you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, I'll tell you, Janey . . ."

"Please don't call me that." Coming off anyone else's lips, it just didn't sound right. Only Scully was allowed to call her that.

He accepted her statement with a nod. "You're different, Jane. Not like other women I've dated. Besides understanding all my business talk, you make a man have serious thoughts about settling down, getting off the merry-go-round, coming home to the same woman every night."

Jane was sorry she'd asked. Now what would she do? "We haven't known each other very long, Quinn . . ."

"I realize that, but I want to see you often. I think I'm falling in love with you, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize that."

"I see," Jane said in a quiet voice.

Quinn didn't continue with the subject since he saw that it bothered her. When he took her home that evening, he gave her a platonic kiss on the cheek and said he'd call the following week.

Jane really liked Quinn but it wasn't in her conservative nature to even think of love so soon. And even though she'd spent so much time with Quinn that week, thoughts of Scully still pervaded her dreams that night.

Jane spent a busy week before Scully

arrived. Still a little aggravated with Scully's high-handedness about her social life, for once she didn't go to his condo to check everything out. She delegated that responsibility to her administrative assistant, but was careful to give her a detailed list of items to check. When the woman returned, Jane questioned her extensively. As much as Scully had annoyed her, she still wanted everything to be right for him.

Jane knew Scully didn't like New York, especially in the summer when most of his business cohorts were at their summer places on Long Island. Social life was at a minimum in the city during July and August and Scully liked to be kept busy. She figured him for a week—ten days at the most—then he'd move on. Last year he'd spent August in Canada, the year before that at his house in Maine.

Unless he found some pretty young thing to occupy his time, he'd leave as soon as their business was accomplished. It was just as well. Large doses of Scully in person she couldn't handle.

But she was nervous. Seeing him after six months was going to be difficult. She daydreamed about him when she should have been working. She wondered what he would look like now while she had dinner with Quinn. Which was unfair, but she couldn't help herself.

Quinn noticed her preoccupation and questioned her about it.

"I've just got a lot to do, Quinn," she answered, after she explained that Scully was coming to the city. "He hasn't been here for six months and we have a great deal to accomplish before he gets bored and leaves."

"I bet you think I'm just like him, don't you?"

Jane smiled. "There are similarities, I have to admit."

"Once maybe, but no longer. He won't ever settle down, and I'm ready."

Jane looked uncomfortable and with

good reason. Increasingly, Quinn was making comments about the two of them. Together. He asked her about where she'd like to live, if she wanted children. He was getting serious and she wasn't prepared for it.

"Uh . . . look, Quinn . . . I . . ."

"You don't have to say anything, Jane. I just want you to know my intentions. I want you, but I won't push."

"Thank you," she breathed with relief. "Let me get through this with Scully, then we'll have more time to see where this leads."

Quinn was content with that.

Scully arrived late on Sunday night. Knowing his predilection for sleeping late, Jane didn't expect him in the office until close to noon. It surprised her when he breezed into her office just after nine o'clock.

"Janey . . ." He stood grinning at her from the doorway.

No matter how much she'd steeled herself for this moment, Jane was ill prepared. Tanned and fit, Scully was more handsome than she'd remembered. No signs of aging, not that at thirty-four he was all that old. But a few gray hairs would have pleased her. Sagging pectorals would have been his just desserts. Crow's feet around his eyes would be fitting. Maybe if his tan were peeling or he had a wart.

But Warren Vincent Scully stood before her in all his glory, his emerald eyes smiling, his thatch of brown hair bleached by the sun so that it had highlights, his broad shouldered body enhanced by his expensively tailored suit.

"Sir, you can't just go into Miss Jones' office like that," Amy, Jane's new secretary, objected.

Scully was a tease and enjoyed putting people on. He looked at Jane. "Tell her," he encouraged.

"Amy, this is Mr. Scully," Jane smiled and introduced the two. "Scully, my new secretary and yours, Amy Bowden."

Amy was flustered at the larger than life Mr. Scully and quickly left the office. Scully continued to grin at Jane. "How are you, Janey?"

"Fine, and you?" It was like they hadn't spoken just yesterday.

He nodded, saying without words he was fine as usual. "The offices look terrific," he said while his eyes took in her appearance. Funny that he'd never realized how pretty she was.

Jane grinned, remembering his words about his first office. "Legitimate."

Scully grinned too. "Yeah. We've come a long way, haven't we?"

Jane agreed and offered to show him the whole setup. He patiently followed her through the spacious rooms, greeted everyone and shook hands when she introduced him to new employees hired in the last six months. He was especially fascinated with the computer operation and stopped to ask questions of the young lady in charge. Jane stood silently by as he got his fill. It gave her more opportunity to watch him.

Nothing had changed. She was still in love with him. She still thought him the best looking man she'd ever met, Quinn Marsh notwithstanding. Poor Quinn.

"Janey?" Scully drew her out of her reverie.

Jane shook her head to clear it. "Yes?"

Scully studied her. Something was bothering her, he just knew. "Where were you?"

Jane smiled. "Just thinking about something, nothing important." Wouldn't Quinn Marsh appreciate that!

Scully accepted her answer and asked about the sale of the steel plant. Once again they were on a business basis as they walked back to Jane's office.

"You can use my desk while you're

here, Scully," Jane noted, "and I'll use the conference table." She pointed to the mahogany table in her office where she'd placed her office supplies on Friday afternoon. "Actually this is your office . . ."

Scully grinned. "No, it's yours. I'm not here enough to make use of one. You've done a fine job with the new offices, they look good. And you've hired a responsive staff of knowledgeable people."

"Thanks."

Scully didn't know what he'd expected when he saw Jane again, but whatever it was, it wasn't her reserved manner. While he'd talked with his employees, he'd observed her. She looked every inch a successful career woman, in charge, confident, and comfortable with the staff.

And she wore her success well. The yellow linen suit fit her body discreetly, creating the illusion of a professional, but not hiding the feminine curves. The color enhanced her blue eyes and shiny hair. He'd forgotten how blue her eyes were. And how shapely her legs. He felt good just being in her presence.

"Still seeing Quinn Marsh?" he asked.

"Off and on."

Scully gave her his most beguiling grin. "Am I stepping on forbidden territory?"

"Scully, we've been associates for twelve years, and we've never overstepped the bounds of propriety with each other. I don't want to discuss my personal life with you and I don't wish to hear about yours, if that's okay with you."

Well, he guessed he'd been told. "Fine, I didn't mean to pry."

Jane nodded. "We have a lot to cover while you're here and we'd best get at it. I have appointments set up with your lawyer and stockbroker and your mother wants you to come to dinner on Wednesday."

"My mother? When did you talk to her?"

"I talk to her once a week to let her

know where you are and what you're doing." Jane grinned at him. "I gather that's more than you do."

"I thought we weren't going to interfere in each other's lives," he teased.

Jane looked affronted. "I'm sorry. It's just that she worries about you when you don't call. I'll stop if you like."

"I was just teasing! I appreciate your talking to her. I try to call my parents every so often, but sometimes I forget."

"Was everything to your liking at your condo?" Jane inquired, wanting all the loose ends tied together.

"It always is."

Jane covered other areas of his living accommodations and Scully noted a hint of belligerence in her questions, but he didn't comment.

Soon they reverted to business and he was too absorbed in the transactions to be concerned about her strained attitude toward him. They had a working lunch, with sandwiches Jane'd ordered ahead of time, brought in from a local deli. He smiled when he saw that her selection for him was his favorite—hot pastrami and Polish sausage with mustard on pumpernickel bread. She'd even thought of the cream soda that he liked and the sour pickles he was fond of.

After that first day in the office, Scully didn't come in again. That suited Jane. She went back to using her desk and conducted business as usual. Scully kept the appointments she'd made for him and sent her any pertinent papers by courier. He talked to her every day, as usual, but the routine of her job was normal. She relaxed and wondered what all the tension had been about. Scully was still Scully.

New York was the hub of Scully's activity and he enjoyed meeting with business cohorts and cutting deals much as he always had. Even with some of his contacts out of town or on vacation, he was

able to find plenty of projects to keep him occupied. The biggest was the one that had brought him to New York in the first place.

The Chumley Hotel was for sale and he intended to buy it. A stately structure with an imposing edifice, it was sorely in need of refurbishing, management and policy changes. But the Chumley family was hard to deal with. Scully had to pull out all his talents as a negotiator, plus pay more than he wanted for the crumbling building.

But it was an important project to him, one that would lend itself to his staying in New York for a while. He supposed it was the pulse of the city that had drawn him back again and made him want to hang around.

The negotiations had been private, just between him and Arnold Chumley, who had insisted on secrecy so that a major hotel chain wouldn't get wind of it. Scully had agreed, not telling his lawyer or even Jane, until an agreement had been solidified. Chumley wouldn't sell until he had Scully's solemn word that he wouldn't alter the ambiance of the famous hotel, but simply update and remodel what was necessary. Scully agreed to maintain the aura of personalized service, old-world charm and top-flight cuisine for the next five years. They struck a deal.

Scully took his plans to his lawyer and the contract was drawn up. Chumley signed.

Befitting the occasion, Scully decided on a luncheon to make the announcement. Select members of the press, Jane, his lawyer, Chumley's attorney and a hand-picked group of his friends were invited to dine with him that Friday at The Four Seasons restaurant.

The day of the luncheon, Jane had been at work since seven in the morning, trying to catch up on paperwork that Scully

generated even when he wasn't in the office. Since she didn't have any idea how long he would be in the city, she wanted to get as much taken care of as possible so he could sign off on the papers while he was still around.

He'd been in town almost two weeks, which was unusual in itself. Compounding that was some sort of secret project he was working on, which he hadn't seen fit to discuss with her. Not that it was the first time he'd done that, but this time it rankled.

She'd decided to put Quinn Marsh on hold for the duration of Scully's visit. But, like Scully, he was persistent, so one of the first phone calls she got that morning was from him.

"Hello, Quinn," she mouthed when her secretary informed her who was on the line.

"Jane, it's been two weeks and I haven't seen you."

"I told you I'd be busy while my boss's here."

"But you didn't expect him to stay this long," Quinn pressed.

"No, I didn't," Jane replied dejectedly, "but I'm sure he won't hang around much longer."

"Have lunch with me today."

Jane was aggravated by his seductive tone. She didn't need this: Scully calling her night and day with grandiose plans and schemes and now Quinn harassing her about going out with him. "I can't, I'm having lunch with Scully today. Quinn, I'm awfully busy. I'll call you when he's gone, okay?" She tried to make her voice pleasant, but it was an uphill battle all the way.

"Jane, marry me and let me take you away from all this," he whispered sexily.

"Quinn, please! You promised not to push, remember?"

He acquiesced, but Jane could tell he was none too pleased. He was cool when

she said goodbye.

Jane hardly had time to think about her conversation when Scully's mother called.

"Jane? Oh, good, I got you. I called your house this morning but there wasn't any answer. Where were you?" Mrs. Scully questioned.

Jane tried to curb her anger as she viewed the stack of letters she needed to read and sign before lunch. Modulating her voice, she replied, "I came to work early. What can I do for you, Mrs. Scully?"

"I just wondered if you knew whether Warren was coming out to the house this Sunday for dinner."

She had to be the only person in the world who called Scully, Warren. Jane was exasperated with the call, but didn't want to take it out on the unassuming woman. She and Mrs. Scully had a pleasant relationship.

"I'm sorry, I don't know. Scully hasn't said anything about it. I'm going to see him at lunch, I'll tell him to call you."

"That would be fine. I would have called Warren, but I know he likes to sleep late and I didn't want to bother him."

While gritting her teeth and keeping her anger under control, Jane said, "That's okay, Mrs. Scully, call me anytime."

"We'd like to have you come with Warren, if you'd like."

"Thank you, but I have other plans." Jane hung up the telephone seething. She didn't want to wake Scully? Terrific! Now she got to be the placating daughter-in-law, too!

Jane got herself a cup of coffee and tried to put her day in perspective. She had ignored Quinn for the past two weeks and she could understand his complaints. Mrs. Scully had called her for years asking about Scully, so that wasn't unusual. I'm just tired, she mused to herself, and I've let these things grow out of propor-

tion.

She'd settled down to her work and was making great headway a couple hours later when she got the call that broke the camel's back.

"Miss Jones, it's Mr. Scully on line one," Amy said through the intercom.

"Thanks, Amy," Jane said, taking a deep breath and pushing the lit button on her phone. "Hi, Scully," she greeted.

"Morning, Janey. How goes it?"

"I'm busy, but coping," she said, thinking that was the understatement of the year.

"I've got a problem. The laundry where I send my clothes has closed for vacation. What should I do?"

Jane was speechless with indignation. Celeste's words came back to haunt her. His laundry? He wanted her to do something about his laundry?

In as calm a voice as she could muster, she said, "Find another laundry." The words were clipped, she knew, but enough was enough.

"I thought you might recommend one."

"I do my own laundry, Scully, so I'm not familiar with any commercial laundries."

"I suppose I could ask the maid . . ."

"Why don't you do that? I'll see you at lunch." With that, Jane replaced the receiver with more force than necessary. What next? Come over and give him a back rub? Help him pick out his tie clip? Darn his socks? The man was absolutely impossible.

By the time of the ill-fated luncheon at The Four Seasons, Jane had convinced herself that she could be civil to Scully for the space of a couple of hours. Since others had been invited, she'd make it a special point to sit as far away from him as possible. Maybe that way she wouldn't be tempted to hit him.

But it didn't help to spot Celeste seated

at the table when the maître d' showed Jane to it.

"What are you doing here?" Jane questioned, giving only a cursory glance to the opposite end where Scully was deep in conversation with his lawyer.

Celeste smiled. "I can't tell you until Scully makes his announcement, but I'm here in an official capacity."

Jane sat down and looked around at the other guests. Five of them were from the media. Scully's lawyer sat on his right. An elderly gentleman, dignified and conservative looking, was seated next to a beautiful young blond woman, who in turn was seated to Scully's left.

Getting the call from Quinn, then the one from Mrs. Scully, then talking with Scully himself about his laundry all faded into the background of Jane's mind as she viewed the young woman. She was hanging on every word Scully said. She had to be his date.

Jane was hurt and for the first time in years, felt like crying. As she accepted a glass of champagne from the attentive waiter, she tried to reason with herself. Put this in perspective, Jane Jones, and do it now. You work for Warren Vincent Scully, you don't have a personal relationship with him. What he does is his business, who he dates is his affair. You're being asinine.

Hugging that logic to her, she engaged in idle talk with others at the table. One man, Jay Sennett, was a good friend of Scully's, a man who'd shared many bachelor activities with him. He was also rich and for years had been quite the man about town. Just after Scully left New York the last time, Jay had gotten married and he now talked lovingly about his wife. Jane listened and made appropriate comments. Although still angry and hurt, she attempted to be a pleasant luncheon companion.

Scully was at his most charming during

the meal. He talked with the representatives of the media and made introductions around the table. Jane was surprised to learn that the elderly gentleman's name was Arnold Chumley. It was not the most common of names, and Jane assumed he must be associated with the Chumley Hotel. The young woman was introduced only by name with no label as to whether she was Scully's date or not.

After the dessert plates were cleared, Scully stood up, not drawing too much interest from other diners in the now almost empty restaurant. It had been a late lunch and it was after three in the afternoon.

"I've asked you all here to make an announcement. It gives me great pleasure to tell you that I have purchased the Chumley Hotel from Mr. Arnold Chumley." Scully nodded in deference to the previous owner.

A hum of speculation wended its way around the table. No one was more surprised than Jane. So this was his secret project.

"What are your plans for the hotel?" one of the media people asked.

Scully smiled and his eye caught Jane's. "It will be renamed The Warren Hotel and my associate, Miss Jane Jones, will be in complete charge of the refurbishing and management of it." He grinned at Jane. "She and I will be equal partners in the endeavor."

Jane was stunned and more than a little angry. Furious about covered it. Equal partners? What did that mean? She didn't have the funds to buy into something like the Chumley Hotel, and Scully knew it. She knew nothing about hotel management or restoration of a building that size. Scully had finally gone off the deep end. Totally bonkers. Certifiably crazy.

"Miss Jones, what do you think about this?"

"Has it come as a surprise to you?"

"What do you plan to do? Will anything

change immediately?"

"Will the hotel be closed during renovation?"

Questions from the media abounded. In her usual calm, controlled manner, Jane smiled and said, "Mr. Scully and I haven't worked out any details as yet. We'll have to get back to you on the long range plans after we've had some time to talk." She chanced a scathing look at Scully.

When she couldn't elucidate, the media turned to ask Mr. Chumley questions and, of course, Scully. It was another fifteen minutes before the clamor died down. The media representatives were scribbling notes as Scully and Mr. Chumley talked.

Soon after the questions stopped, Scully proposed a toast. Jane watched him down his champagne, knowing from the flushed look to his face that he'd had one glass too many. Along with everything else she knew about him, she knew he couldn't handle champagne very well and usually stayed away from it.

After the toast, Mr. Chumley rose to leave. Jane was surprised to see the young beautiful woman go with him.

Jay Sennett spoke to Scully during a lull. "My wife would be happy to discuss the interior design with you, Scully." Jay's wife was an interior decorator but was on a buying trip and couldn't make the luncheon today, he'd explained to Jane earlier.

"I had her in mind for this, Jay, but that will be up to Jane. How're you liking married life?"

"It couldn't be better. You should try it," Jay joked.

"That's not a bad idea," Scully intoned, getting the full attention of the media once again. To have the Midas Man talk of marriage was as newsworthy as the purchase of the Chumley Hotel.

Jay knew his friend well, but couldn't resist a little judicious kidding. "Do you have anyone particular in mind?"

Feeling expansive from the coup of purchasing the Chumley and from too many glasses of champagne, Scully raised his glass towards Jane. "Perhaps the fair Miss Jones would do me the honor?" Scully's eyes were twinkling with the humor he found in the situation. He expected a snappy comeback from Jane, one he knew would get him off the hook and entertain the media.

Jane had been wrong about the call from Scully that morning about his laundry. That hadn't been the straw that broke the camel's back. This was. Receiving a lackadaisical proposal in order to magnify Scully's image with the media infuriated Jane.

Her quick mind raced over the possibilities. She knew what Scully expected, knew what she ought to say. She could undo all this later, but for now, Scully deserved a lesson, in manners.

With a jaunty tilt to her head, and a gracious smile to the media people, she raised her glass towards Scully.

"I'd be delighted to marry you, Scully," she said.

Celeste clapped her hands in diabolical glee, Jay stood up to shake Scully's hand in camaraderie and the media opened another barrage of questions about the impending marriage.

The startled look of stupefaction on Scully's face wasn't lost on Jane or Celeste, but somehow the media and Jay Sennett missed it entirely.

Celeste Ralston hadn't risen to her position in the law firm or been able to handle a deal as large as the sale of the Chumley Hotel without having great powers of perception. And they didn't fail her at that moment. She knew what Jane had done, and why.

"Jane, let's take a trip to the powder room," she effused.

Jane needed the time to think, so she

agreed.

"Jane Jones, I don't believe it! You really got him this time," Celeste raved as they stepped into the deserted lounge.

"I don't know what I've done; Celeste, or why," Jane said, looking flustered. "That's not exactly true, I do know why." Quickly, Jane explained the events of the morning and then capped off her speech with her resentment at Scully's announcement about her supervising the Chumley Hotel.

"He deserves it, Jane, he really does," Celeste said when she finished.

"But I can't really do this to him, Celeste."

"Sure you can! Don't go all softhearted about him now." Celeste, with amazing powers of recollection, began a litany of all Scully's sins over the last ten years. She and Jane had been friends since high school, so she knew every nuance of Jane's working career. With her glib tongue, she fanned the flames of Jane's anger.

"All right, I agree, he needs a lesson. Now what do I do?"

"Here's my plan," Celeste began. "We'll pull out all the stops, plan a wedding of mammoth proportions, including parties for the two of you, showers, a big, gala engagement party. Then we'll choose silver, linens, crystal and china . . ."

"Celeste, get serious!"

"I am. We'll do it up right," she said, grinning. "Then, just before the wedding, you can call it off, tell him you were only kidding. I'll leave it to you to explain it to him, as I'm sure you will."

"Doesn't it seem to you that the punishment is too much for the crime?" Jane hesitated. "He could fire me."

"I doubt that. He'd have to hire ten other people to do what you do for him. Besides, you've had other job offers. Take one of them. I'm sure Quinn Marsh would hire you."

"Quinn! Oh, my God, I forgot about Quinn! What will I tell him?"

Celeste grinned to herself. Jane was going to do it.

"I'm not sure, but it will be very important for you not to tell anyone the truth, including Quinn Marsh. If we're going to pull this off, you have to be believable, Jane. Any hint that things are not as they seem could be deadly. I think only Rebecca should be taken into our confidence."

Jane mulled over what Celeste had said, then thought of all the things Scully had expected of her over the years. It was time someone taught him a lesson. What better person to do it than her?

"I'll do it!"

They both realized that their absence from the table would be noticed if they didn't return soon, so they went back to the luncheon party. Celeste gave Jane a warning not to be alone with Scully until they'd had a chance to meet with Rebecca and solidify their plan of action.

Scully and his lawyer were deep in conversation and all the others had left so Celeste and Jane murmured their goodbyes and walked away with only a cursory wave from Scully.

Celeste was like a puppy with a sock, her imagination running full out with plans for the wedding.

"I'm not so sure about this, Celeste," Jane wavered while they were hailing a cab out on the street.

"Jane, the die is cast. It will be in all the papers tomorrow so you can't back out now. Let's go see Rebecca."

Jane's thoughts were muddled, so she didn't argue when Celeste gave the cab driver the information to take them to Lord and Taylor on Fifth Avenue. She wondered if she'd had too much champagne, too.

Fortunately, Rebecca was able to see them immediately and Jane let Celeste do all the talking.

"This is terrific!" she expostulated.

"I thought you liked Scully," Jane intoned.

"Liking him and teaching him a lesson are two different things. His laundry, for God's sake! Oh, boy, this is rich." Her eyes danced with the possibilities.

Jane didn't contribute much to the conversation. While her friends were making grandiose plans she called her office and told them she wouldn't be in the rest of the day, in case Scully was trying to find her.

As Jane listened to the two women talk, she wondered why the military had been so slow in allowing women to enter the battlefield. Just hearing the diabolical schemes her friends were cooking up made the invasion of Europe seem rather paltry.

Rebecca had a cottage on Long Island and the three of them decided to retreat there for the weekend to refine their scheme.

Back in his condo an hour after the luncheon, Scully was beside himself. Marry Jane? That wasn't what he wanted. Was it? Of course not! Damn that champagne.

Scully's head felt like a balloon. He knew he couldn't handle champagne, had known it for years. But no other liquid was appropriate for a celebration. Nobody wanted to toast with cherry Coke, his personal favorite.

Surely Jane would understand. She knew he'd had too much to drink. She knew how champagne affected him. Good old Jane. She'd get them out of this mess.

Scully tossed and turned on the bed, wishing he'd never had the salmon with Hollandaise sauce for lunch. Just thinking about food made him nauseous. He called the office, hoping someone would be there until six.

"This is Scully," he moaned into the

phone when Amy answered. "Is Jane there?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Scully, she isn't. She called and said she wouldn't be in until Monday. But she said if you called, to tell you your mother is expecting you for dinner on Sunday."

"Do you know where she is, Amy?" he asked.

"Your mother?"

It was all he could do not to snap at the woman. "No, Jane."

"She didn't say."

"Thanks," he muttered and let the phone drop into the cradle.

Dammit! He'd had such plans for the Chumley. And it was going to be such a surprise for Jane. For all her years of devoted service and her hard work, he was going to give her half of the Chumley as a bonus. They'd own it jointly. But somehow, in his befuddled stupor that afternoon, he'd failed to tell her or the media that. May he never drink another drop of champagne again!

He rolled over and fell into a troubled sleep.

Jane didn't sleep well on Friday night either. When she did drift into a restless slumber in the wee hours of the morning, she slept soundly and didn't arise until late on Saturday morning.

By that time, Celeste, with her copious notes on a legal pad, and Rebecca, who was adding to the lists quickly, were raring to go, their heads filled with ideas.

"Jane, you're not having second thoughts about this, are you?" Rebecca asked when she saw the desolate look on Jane's face as she was getting a cup of restorative coffee.

"Not anymore. I thought it all over last night and he deserves everything we can throw at him." Jane then began to recount many incidences over the past twelve years that no one had ever heard. Times

when she'd cleaned up after Scully, both in his personal life and his business dealings. She'd gotten him out of more scrapes than anyone knew!

He'd taken her for granted, and she was tired of it. It was time.

With the enthusiasm of her friends, she jumped into the foray of planning the society wedding of Jane Emily Jones and Warren Vincent Scully.

Their plans were meticulous to the last detail.

Celeste had drawn a gigantic calendar and as they solidified each event, they'd penciled it in the appropriate day. By late Sunday afternoon, they'd taken care of every weekend right up to the bogus wedding day, a late September date. No factor or scenario had been overlooked by the time the trio made their way back to New York City late Sunday night. They contacted many of Scully's friends and arranged engagement parties and social events to cover the next month.

The overriding point they kept harping at Jane about was that she couldn't afford to be alone with Scully long enough for them to have a serious talk.

"But how about in the office? I can't avoid him there all the time," she reasoned. "And I talk to him every day."

"You'll have to circumvent him," Rebecca said.

"For a month?" Jane asked incredulously.

"Come on, Jane, you're smart. You know his business better than he does. Just see to it that he has to go out of town during the week. Send him on wild goose chases. Tell him you need some vacation to plan for the wedding."

Jane was in the office early on Monday morning. She had a detailed game plan and had plenty to do. While everything was quiet, she reviewed the business of Scully Enterprises and realized she could get Scully out of town for at least three

weeks if she was clever. And knowing Scully like she did, he'd probably arrange to be gone the other one.

The next thing was to call Quinn Marsh and explain the situation to him. It was difficult, but she weathered it. Her second call to Scully's mother was easier and bolstered Jane's confidence that she could really pull this off.

"Mrs. Scully?" Jane asked.

"Oh, Jane, how nice to hear from you. We read in the papers about you and Warren, and his father and I want you to know how pleased we are," the woman gushed.

"Have you . . . uh . . . talked to Scully?" Jane inquired timidly.

"Yes, he was out here last night for dinner. But he didn't seem to feel too well."

Jane could believe that.

"I just wanted to tell you when the wedding would be," Jane began.

"You really love him, don't you, Jane?" Mrs. Scully seemed tentative.

In spite of her resentment, Jane was pleased that she could answer honestly. "Yes, Mrs. Scully, I love him. I always have."

"I knew that, but I just wanted to hear you say it. I told Scully that last evening."

Jane felt a little remorse at setting up his parents, knowing that they would be disappointed when the wedding didn't actually take place, but it couldn't be helped, as Celeste had said. Jane gave Mrs. Scully dates and times and then got off the phone as quickly as possible.

Now for the hardest call of all. Scully. Jane's fingers shook as she dialed his condo number.

"Hello." A deadpan voice.

"Scully? How are you feeling?"

"Janey? Where are you?"

"At the office. I . . . uh . . . want you to know how excited I am about our marriage."

"You are?" he asked, wondering if he was having a nightmare.

Jane drummed her fingers across her leather desk pad. She had a script, all she had to do was follow it.

"Yes, I guess I should tell you that I've loved you for years and just never dreamed you felt the same way."

"You have?"

"Yes, Scully, I have. Ever since Humanities class at NYU."

"I . . . see."

"And if it's all right with you, how's September thirtieth for the wedding?"

"Uh . . . okay . . . I guess . . ."

"And invitations have just been pouring in for parties and social events. I'm absolutely thrilled." Then she listed everything she and her friends had arranged for the next month. "I always wanted a big wedding with all the trimmings."

"You do?" The enormity of it all was overwhelming to him. Jane loved him? Had always loved him? How could he not have seen that? Was she putting him on? He wished he was more awake. He hadn't even had any coffee yet.

Jane was aware that she'd caught him half asleep and she used it to her advantage. Scully was definitely not a morning person.

"Oh, yes, and this will be a wedding to remember. My parents are thrilled, too, and your mother."

"Yeah, I know," he said sullenly. "I was out there last night. Where were you this weekend?"

"I went out to Rebecca's place with Celeste. We made all kinds of plans. Rebecca is going to get me a special wedding gown. Will Jay be your best man? You'll need four groomsmen because I'm going to have four bridesmaids." She chatted easily about the wedding party.

"I'm going to be in the office later today, Jane, perhaps we could talk about it then?"

"What time?"

"About one."

"Okay. And Scully?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really happy, I want you to know that."

Scully didn't reply as he hung up. What in the sweet hell had he gotten himself into?

Jane breathed a sigh of relief as she lowered the phone. With any kind of luck, she'd locked him into the marriage with that call. Now for business plans. She went over the transactions that should take place in the next thirty days. With some careful planning, she could get Scully out of town on weekdays. Since she'd spent all these years talking to him on the telephone, she felt she had better control if she didn't have to see him face to face. He could read people well and Jane was sure if Scully saw too much of her he'd know that this was all a scam.

As it was, Scully fell right into her trap. He hadn't lost his fascination with the man in California who was working on the artificial sweetener and needed financing, and he succumbed to Jane's suggestions that he should attend the sale of the plant in Pennsylvania. Jane revived a few other projects that needed his personal attention so that he was flying cross-country almost every week before the wedding.

On those rare occasions when he came into the office, he accepted her explanations of dress fittings, caterers and florists. When he was out of the office, she kept him fully informed about his business with copies and documents sent by messenger. Somehow she managed to talk to him every day, but kept the conversations to business matters or flooded him with information about wedding plans. If he showed the slightest inclination to discuss something personal, she circumvented him.

As for the social events, Jane saw to it that she and Scully were almost never side

by side for any length of time at a party. Those few times when he couldn't be avoided, she talked business. Pleading the rush of wedding arrangements and business obligations, Jane always met Scully at the parties, not allowing him to pick her up or take her home.

She gave some fleeting thought to why Scully seemed to be taking all this in his stride, which was unlike him, but she didn't dwell on it. The longer he didn't demand a confrontation, the better off she was.

In her apartment, Jane set up a system for the receipt and return of the wedding gifts that continued to roll in on a daily basis. In her usual efficient manner, she unwrapped the gift, then repackaged it for return along with a handwritten note that explained that the wedding wouldn't take place. Once she and Scully had had their talk, she planned to send everything back.

Scully was used to Jane handling all the details, so he never asked her about what she was doing. All he was required to do was select groomsmen and a best man and be fitted with a tuxedo for the big event. He went to the tailor with Jay Sennett on the day and time Jane scheduled for him.

With her friends' help, and Scully's apparent lack of curiosity, Jane was able to continue the ruse of the big wedding. Of course, there were no caterers or florists, no band to arrange, no reception to plan and no trousseau to select. When Jane made those excuses to avoid Scully, she wandered around Macy's for a couple hours or met with Celeste for lunch or a drink.

But the piper had to be paid.

Jane decided to tell Scully the weekend before the wedding. He'd looked at the schedule of events she'd provided for him and noted that Friday night was free. He called her from California and suggested that they have dinner alone that night.

Jane had agreed and invited him to her brownstone. There was no way she was going to tell him the bare truth in a public restaurant.

Jane anticipated the discussion and Scully's reaction, but it didn't keep her from being nervous as she puttered around in her kitchen that Friday afternoon, fixing some of his favorite foods.

Scully was right on time. When the doorbell rang, Jane took a deep breath and pushed the buzzer to let him in.

"Hi, Janey," he said when she met him at the door.

"How was California?"

"Tiring, but I got the money for that guy. About a dozen of us are going to finance him. I have the papers in my briefcase. Gee, something smells good. What did you fix?"

"Veal cutlet, cheese potatoes, broccoli and apple pie."

"My favorites."

Jane was uncomfortable and left him in the living room while she prepared him a drink. No reason to ask what he wanted. She knew.

They talked business during dinner, but Scully sensed something was bothering her. When he finished his second piece of pie, he sat back in the chair and looked at her.

"What's wrong, Janey?" he asked quietly, his eyes never leaving hers. "Wedding jitters?"

The moment of truth was upon her. He was going to be relieved, pleased. Why was she hesitating?

"No, Scully, not wedding jitters, because there isn't going to be any wedding." When he did nothing more than lift one puzzled eyebrow, she continued. "I set you up."

"Why?"

This had all been so clear to her before. Why was she finding it so difficult to say what she wanted to his face? "To teach

you a lesson. Some manners, maybe. To let you know you can't run roughshod over people, can't make decisions for them."

"Not 'them' but you, right?"

"Yes, me. You take too much for granted, Scully. You impose. You're inconsiderate. I could go on and on." She stopped talking, but when he didn't say anything she continued. "The Chumley was the final straw, Scully. Why couldn't you have told me beforehand? Ask me if I wanted to participate?"

"I wanted to surprise you, Janey. You've done so much for me, I wanted to do something for you, but I guess it backfired, didn't it?"

Jane nodded. He seemed to be taking this in his stride, but she had more to tell.

"With the help of my friends, I set up this whole bogus event. I wanted to embarrass you, not let you be in control for once. Aside from the invitations issued, nothing else has been done. There is no church scheduled, no reception planned, no wedding gown or trousseau purchased. I have all the wedding gifts ready to go back to the guests with an explanation."

Scully didn't react with anger as she'd expected him to. He just glared at her.

"I've taken care of everything financially so all that is left to discuss is our business relationship. I'm sure you won't want me to work for you anymore, so I'll tender my resignation right now."

"You had this all figured out, didn't you? How I'd react, what I'd do. We never had any time alone together," he muttered, all of it settling in on him. "You never wanted to marry me?"

This was a reaction she hadn't expected. Instead of sounding relieved, there was a note of sadness in his voice. Surely not. Not Scully, bachelor extraordinaire.

"Scully, I did plan it, down to the last detail. But I also plan to undo it now that I've taught you a lesson." But what lesson

was it, exactly, Jane wondered as she spoke. Suddenly the whole bogus wedding seemed ludicrous to her.

Scully stood up from the table without looking at her. "I need some time to think about this." He said nothing further but turned and left her apartment.

Early the next morning, Jane motored out to her cottage on Long Island. She dropped her luggage in the house and walked to the beach to see the sunrise, hoping she would feel better about what she'd done. Wrapped in a down parka, without makeup and her hair in disarray, she cried for the relationship with Scully she'd lost. But more than anything else, she cried because she still loved him more than ever. And there was no way she could be positive that he'd learned anything at all from the experience.

When the sun was well over the horizon, and Jane had dried her tears, she walked slowly back to her cottage, determined to find some project to keep her hands busy while she thought out her new plan of action. After all, she had to find another job.

It was little more than nine o'clock when she was down on her hands and knees digging up flower bulbs to store them for the winter when she heard a car screech to a halt in front of her house. Her private neighborhood was usually quiet, especially in the off season, so the noise was doubly noticeable.

"Janey!" Scully's voice bellowed. "Where are you?"

Jane scrambled from the ground and rounded the house to find him dressed in a rumpled sweat suit, pounding madly on her door.

"Right here," she answered quietly.

"We have some talking to do," he stated belligerently.

"All right. Come around back and we'll go in the house."

Scully followed her without speaking. Once inside, she offered him coffee.

"I didn't come for refreshments," he said nastily.

Jane crossed her arms under her breasts and glared at him. His high-handed manner annoyed her. "What did you come for?"

Without preamble, he stated, "I asked you a question last night and you didn't answer it."

"Really? What?"

"I asked you if you wanted to marry me. My exact words were 'you never wanted to marry me?' and you didn't reply."

"I didn't think an answer was necessary."

Scully, standing with his legs apart and his arms akimbo, took in Jane's appearance. It had been years since he had seen her look like anything but a well-dressed, successful career woman. Seeing her now in faded jeans with moist patches of soil on the knees and a sloppy gray sweatshirt reminded him of the first time he'd seen her.

In a less testy voice, he said, "I'd like an answer now."

"I don't know what you're driving at, Scully. What difference does it make? I wanted to teach you a lesson and I guess I failed. You're still as obnoxious and demanding as ever, expecting everyone to dance to your tune." Jane was furious at his domineering manner.

"Answer me."

Good God, he was like a dog worrying about a bone! Well, this time he'd really asked for it! "Okay, Scully, here's your answer. No, I never wanted to marry you. Why would I want to attach myself to a man with the morals of an oversexed alley cat?"

"You think I'm immoral? When did you ever know me to cheat on a business deal?"

"Business ethics aren't what we're discussing."

"Look, Jane, I run a multi-million dollar business and I don't have time . . ."

"Correction. You own a business, I run it."

"Conceded." He hesitated a minute, then said quietly, "I'm disappointed in you." At the haughty raise of her eyebrows, he continued, "I never thought you were gullible enough to believe everything you read about me in the newspapers."

"Oh?"

"Just because I escorted a woman to the ballet or the symphony or a play or a party didn't necessarily mean I slept with her later that night."

"Well, forgive me, Saint Scully, for making that assumption."

"I never said I was a saint, either, Janey." Hell, what was wrong with him? He'd come here to tell her something and he'd best get on with it. "But whoever I was with never measured up to you."

Jane's eyes widened and rounded at the unexpected compliment. No words came to her.

Scully ran frustrated fingers through his hair, spiking it. "The best part of every day for me was when I talked to you. I'd find myself in a . . . uh . . . compromising situation . . . and all I could think about was calling you. If you think back on it, all those calls weren't necessary."

"Scully . . ."

"Let me finish. It wasn't just chance that made me come sit by you in Humanities class way back in college. I stood at the door and looked the room over. When I saw the prettiest girl in the room, I made a beeline to sit beside you. When I got to know you, all I could think about was being a success to prove myself to you."

"And you waited twelve years to tell me this?" she asked incredulously.

"I wasn't aware of it until that day when

you snapped at me when I was in Spain."

"You are certifiably insane, Scully, absolutely nuts! Did it ever occur to you that I might form an attachment to someone else, even marry him? What were you expecting me to do? Wait in line as a human sacrifice to your charm? I do date, you know."

"Yes, I know. I know all about that lawyer a couple years ago and Quinn Marsh recently."

"My curiosity is killing me. How did you know?"

Scully had the decency to look chagrined. "My lawyer kept me informed in a roundabout way."

Jane talked with Scully's lawyer almost daily and they'd formed a friendship over the years. As she thought about it now, she realized the confidences she'd revealed to the man who she'd once considered her friend. "He volunteered the information about my love life?" Talk about breaches of confidence!

"I asked. Sometimes I had to pull the information from him."

"Why?"

"Because I had to know." Nervously, he paced the confines of the small kitchen. "This isn't easy to explain."

"Try," Jane said succinctly.

As skilled as he was in negotiation for business deals, Scully was in unfamiliar territory when he tried to relate his emotions:

"You were just always there for me, Janey, whenever I called, for whatever I needed. At first, I thought you wouldn't want any personal relationship with me. And to be perfectly honest, I wasn't ready for a commitment. I wanted to travel the world, see things I'd never seen, do things only money and position could provide, and I thought it would be better to do that alone." He hesitated, searching for words. "There haven't been all that many women, Janey."

"I find that hard to believe, Scully," Jane said derisively.

"Didn't you ever wonder why I didn't give you more explicit details of my love life?"

"I assumed we had only a business relationship."

"The straight fact was, I didn't have much to tell. It seems impossible to me now that I've let all these years go by without telling you how I felt, but I was caught up in the glamour of my life and the excitement of the challenge of making money. One deal evolved into another and I was so busy that I didn't take the time to think about anything else," he said in a confessional tone, his back to her as he talked.

"And now?" Jane couldn't give him any quarter just yet.

Scully's face was anguished. When he spoke, Jane could hear his torment. "You have every right to throw me out of here and never want to see me again. I wouldn't like it, but I'd understand it. I have used you, taken advantage of you and made assumptions about you. I knew you'd always be there for me, Janey, and I relied on that. That's a terrible thing to do to someone, especially someone you love."

"You love me?"

Scully turned around and looked into her eyes. "More than anything in the whole world." He observed her incredulous look, then continued. "I've been an idiot, Janey. It took me all of last night to piece it together. One of the reasons I moved from place to place so often was that I was restless, searching for something, but I didn't know what. I surprised myself when you sprang the wedding on me. At first, I rebelled, but the idea grew on me."

"I wondered why you didn't give me an argument."

"I've lived on the surface too long, nev-

er taking time to delve into my feelings. But last night I did. I admitted what I really want. I'm tired of having houses. I want a home. With you. I want children with your beautiful blue eyes. I want to be a good husband. I love you, Janey, and I really do want you to marry me."

Jane had never seen him like this, all strung out with his feelings. In dreams, she'd wondered about what their children would look like. Had they both needed the time to establish their separate lives? Had neither of them been ready for a commitment until now? Did it matter?

"Janey, for God's sake, say something!" Scully barked.

Her blue eyes widened, then softened. She smiled.

"I love you, Warren."

"Warren?" The use of his first name startled him.

"Yes, Warren. You don't expect me to call the father of my children by his last name, do you?"

Scully took a step towards her, halted, then saw the loving look in her eyes. He closed the gap between them as she opened her arms to welcome him, forgiving him for all his indiscretions. He enveloped her in a bear hug, then drew back so that he could kiss her. His large hands delved into her hair as he held her steady for his kiss.

"I've dreamed of this so many times . . . I love you so much, Janey . . . so much. I'll make up to you . . ."

"Stop, please, Scully," Jane cautioned with a smile. "I can take you brash and arrogant, but I'd find you hard to live with if you were humble."

Words became superfluous in the sunlight flooded kitchen as the happy pair acquainted themselves with each other, tasting and sipping the elixir of discovered love.

In typical Scully fashion, he wheeled

and dealed to pull the wedding of the season together. The stately elegance of the Chumley Hotel was decorated with masses of flowers for the gala reception following a picturebook wedding at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Jane never understood how he had managed to put it all together in just a week. Sometimes it was better not to ask.

After they'd made love on their wedding night in the magnificent bridal suite of the Chumley, Scully, never turning loose of Jane, reached over and turned on the bedside light.

"I've got a wedding present for you, sweetheart," he said after kissing her soundly.

Jane pondered what could top his gift of the deed to the Chumley Hotel, but she smiled indulgently as he handed her a

heavy square package. When she tore off the paper, she collapsed in giggles against his naked chest.

It was his Humanities 101 textbook with his name scrawled in big letters inside the front cover. He flipped the pages to the back cover and pointed to a heart with an arrow through it he'd drawn. Inside the heart it said, "Scully loves Janey."

Jane looked at him with all her love in her eyes. "Janey loves Scully, too," she breathed against his mouth.

"It's been there all this time."

Jane's last fleeting thought as Scully turned out the light and encircled her in his arms was that she was going to end up doing his laundry.

In dreams, it was what she'd always wanted. ♥



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*Surrender
The
Dawn*

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Policewoman Laura Davis was raped while working on a sting operation organized by Federal Agent Kyle Patterson. Now they are unexpected partners on another operation and long for each other across a chasm of guilt and fear.

JAN MATHEWS

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The window shades were drawn, and the hotel room was dark and smoke-filled from too many cigarettes. Tension ran high. Kyle Patterson could feel it as he waited with officers from the Chicago Metropolitan Drug Enforcement Group as they listened to their sophisticated recording equipment.

By this time the drug buy should have gone down, and Tony Calimara, the most powerful mobster in the city, should have been behind bars. Even though Kyle

couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, he knew something was wrong. Perhaps Calimara had grown suspicious and postponed the buy. For sure, too much time had elapsed since Laura Davis had gone in.

For the past few days Laura had been walking a tightrope, "dating" the mobster while keeping him at arm's length. She was supposed to get close to him, be conveniently present when the goods arrived, and then the rest of the group would go in.

and make the arrest.

"Maybe your friends aren't coming." Her voice drifted over the tape recorder. "It's getting late."

Easy, Kyle thought. *Go easy!* As a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent, Kyle didn't have jurisdiction here, but he had spearheaded the entire operation. He had heard about the drug deal on a weapons raid last week in New York, and on orders from the Bureau, he'd immediately flown to Chicago. He sure as hell didn't want to see an undercover policewoman hurt. Particularly not this one. He'd known a lot of women in his thirty-five years, but this one was special—beautiful, smart.

"So," Laura spoke again, "do you think maybe Mario got caught in traffic?"

"Perhaps," the gangster answered. "You know, Laura, you seem awfully worried about my friends."

"Do I? I'm just anxious to go out to dinner."

"Here I was beginning to think maybe you were attracted to Mario."

"That's silly, Tony. Why would I be attracted to Mario?"

"You're an awfully pretty woman."

"And that makes me fickle?"

"No, but it's been my experience not to trust pretty women." There was a slight pause. "Sometimes they're cops. Are you a cop, Laura?"

She laughed gaily. "Me? A cop? That's ridiculous."

"I hope so," Calimara went on. "Because I hate cops. I'd get awfully angry if I thought you were one."

"Tony, you're so suspicious."

"You're right," he retorted. "I am suspicious. And for some reason, sweet, I don't believe you."

Suddenly there was the sound of material ripping.

"That's her dress!" one of the MEG officers shouted. "The crud, he's ripping her

dress!"

"Are you a cop, Laura?" Calimara went on angrily. "Are you wired?" The mobster was so well guarded they hadn't been able to plant any listening devices in his apartment. When Laura had gone in earlier, she'd stuck one beneath the coffee table.

"Tony, stop!"

"Good. No wire."

"Of course I'm not wired," she answered. "What's wrong with you? Don't do this."

"Do what? This?" The sound of her dress ripping further echoed through the room. "How about this?"

"Bastard," one of the MEG officers cried. "We've got to help her."

"No! You've been screaming all night long that Calimara would kill Laura if he found out she was a cop," Lieutenant Jim Hines snapped at the other man. "Well, you're right. If we go storming in there she won't have a chance."

The sound of glass crashing brought their attention back to the tape recorder. Laura must have thrown something at Calimara.

"Ah," the gangster said, "You've got some spunk. Good. I was hoping you'd be a fighter. We're going to have a good time, babe, you and I. A real good time."

Kyle couldn't stand it. Sickened, he bolted for the door when Hines jerked him back. "Where the hell do you think you're going, Patterson?"

"I'm going to help her. He's raping her."

"I know." Hines clenched his jaw. "I don't like it any more than you do."

"Then why aren't you doing something about it?"

"Because," he said softly, "I don't want her dead."

"What are you going to do? Just sit here and listen?"

Hines nodded. "Yeah. And I'm going to wait for Calimara to buy the drugs that

Mario is bringing and I'm going to put him away forever."

It was spring now and Laura had come a long way from that night last fall. The rape didn't occupy her mind constantly, like it had at first. There were days she didn't even think about it until she was reminded of it. Like now.

Across the squad room a young girl sat sobbing. A policewoman was consoling her. Next would be the hospital: the cold, critical examination for evidence. Then the interrogation, looking through mug shots, trying to identify her attacker, the lineup, the charges. The trial. If there was a trial.

Sighing, Laura turned as another policewoman approached her desk. Cassie Hudson was a tall, buxom brunette who had befriended Laura when she'd transferred over. When most of her coworkers were uncomfortable speaking to her, Cassie had talked about the rape matter-of-factly.

Cassie smiled at Laura. "Captain wants to see you."

Laura brightened. Perhaps Captain Warner wanted to talk to her about her transfer back into Metropolitan Drug Enforcement Group. A few weeks ago she'd put in a request to go back to undercover. "Do you know what's going on?" Laura asked.

"No," Cassie answered. "But whatever it is, it's big. The Chief of Police just left. There's a few guys from MEG and there's an agent from ATF, who's one hell of a looker."

The last Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent Laura had met had been Kyle Patterson. And he'd been one hell of a looker; tall and well built with dark hair and piercing gray eyes. After the rape and Calimara's arrest, he came to visit her in the hospital. But she'd been too distraught to accept the sympathies of anyone, let

alone a stranger.

A stranger who had overheard her violation.

"Do you really think you're ready to go back out there, Laura? I know I couldn't do it," Cassie said.

There were times Laura thought the same thing. It also didn't help that she'd screwed up once when she'd first transferred out of MEG. She'd been working as a beat cop for only a few days, and when the drunk had come on to her, she'd broken down and had been unable to make the arrest. She knew she must conquer her fear. "I have to," Cassie.

"What's it going to be like seeing the guys in MEG again? Actually facing them? That's got to be tough."

"I'm not certain," Laura answered honestly.

"You were a dynamite undercover cop," Cassie went on. "Calimara's still in jail on drug charges, isn't he?"

"Yes." But he hadn't been convicted of rape. Laura hadn't even filed charges, not when her lawyer had pointed out that she had every chance of losing simply because she wasn't a virgin.

"Well, good luck," Cassie smiled. "I'll try to stop by after work to hear what happened."

"Fine." Laura smiled back and walked into Captain Warner's office. There were only a few men present. Jim Hines sat in a chair. Stan Smith, another MEG officer she'd worked with, stood to the side..

The precinct captain motioned to a chair. "Have a seat, Laura. I understand you know everyone here." Captain Warner gestured to someone standing near a file cabinet. "I understand you've met Kyle Patterson, too."

For a moment Laura didn't believe her ears. Slowly she turned around. Kyle Patterson was leaning against the wall. He was just as she'd remembered: tall, broad shouldered, and handsome, perhaps more

so.

"Laura." He inclined his head politely and she read something in his gaze, something darkly exciting.

Was she ready for this? To her distress she felt her hands start to tremble.

"I've got your transfer request here," Captain Warner was saying. "We've been talking about putting you back on MEG. Think you're ready?"

Laura took a deep breath. "I . . . I've missed MEG."

"This is a big assignment, Laura. Frankly, I should tell you I'm concerned about your ability to perform." Suddenly he reddened and cleared his throat.

People do that all the time, Laura thought. They became embarrassed at the slightest reference to her attack. She became known as the officer over at the Lakewood Station who had been raped. Only "raped" had been whispered. As though they were to blame.

"I can do the job," she said quietly.

The captain flushed again and shifted some papers. "Laura, the department psychiatrist thinks you're trying to prove something by requesting this transfer."

"She's right," Laura admitted. Dr. Lowenstein knew her too well. "I am trying to prove something. I'm trying to prove I'm a good undercover cop."

Kyle Patterson walked slowly around the desk until he was looking directly at her. "The street's too dangerous a place to be out there trying to prove something, Laura," he said.

"I didn't mean it that way," she tried to explain. "I'm not on a vendetta. All I want is a chance to show everyone that I've healed; and I'm ready to work."

"Why not vice?" he asked. "Why MEG?"

She paused only a moment. "Vice is fine, too, if that's where Captain Warner decides to assign me, but I spent five years with MEG."

"And this particular operation?"

"I put in for a transfer. I didn't know about this operation. I don't know why I'm being considered, or even if I'm being considered." She paused briefly. "Am I?"

He didn't answer her directly. Instead he said, "What do you know about guns?"

"They go *bang-bang*."

Now why had she smarted off like that? For some reason she was furious with him—furious that he would question her training, her motives.

Finally, Kyle asked, "Are you familiar with an Uzi?"

"It's an Israeli-designed nine-millimeter submachine gun noted for its compact size," she said quickly, grateful he had given her another chance. "It's capable of firing a clip of up to forty rounds of ammunition and the muzzle velocity is four hundred miles per hour."

"Very good," he said, his gaze still riveted on her. "The Uzi is the latest thing in gang warfare. They're being bought and sold in the United States by the truckloads. One truckload can cost a million dollars on the street."

"Who's selling them?" Laura asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "I believe it's the mob."

"Where is the mob getting the guns?"

"Manufacturers. Also they're stealing them from warehouses. Last month a shipment was stolen right off the deck of a freighter in New York Harbor and a week ago one of the guns showed up in a pawn shop on the West Side of your fair city."

"Any more?"

"Yes, one more, somewhere on the West Side, too, but nothing yet anywhere else, although we've sent the serial numbers out to police departments nationwide."

"And you want us to help find the person behind it?"

"I'd like to shut the pipeline down."

Laura nodded. "I can do it," she said.

"Look, Kyle, we've never done much weapons work," Hines said. "Like I said before, if this is a complicated plan, you might be better off with vice."

"Agent Patterson has already explained his plan to me," Captain Warner cut in. "And I'm convinced your personnel will work best for the job, Jim." Suddenly he paused and glanced at Laura. "That's all for now, Officer Davis."

Laura paused. "Excuse me, sir, have you decided about my transfer? Will I be part of the operation?"

"I'll be making that decision," Kyle cut in. "I'll let you know later today."

"I'm off duty at three." She glanced up at the clock on the wall. That was ten minutes from now. "But I'll stick around for a while. I've got some paperwork to catch-up on."

"Laura," Captain Warner called when she rose to leave. "You've got an excellent record."

Did that mean he was going to recommend her? Unable to tell, she left quickly.

For the next hour Laura typed reports and filed. Finally the door of Captain Warner's office opened and Kyle Patterson walked slowly toward her. "Laura," he started to say, "I'm sorry we—"

She didn't wait for him to finish. She couldn't bear to hear that they had rejected her. "Excuse me," she interrupted, turning away, "I'm late for an appointment."

"Laura, wait."

She supposed she owed him an explanation. "Look, I don't blame you for not selecting me for your operation," she said. "But you have to understand that I can't just stand here and listen while you break the news to me. I'm a good cop, and yet I'm on trial, and the weird thing is, I didn't do anything wrong. I was the victim."

She paused, getting a grip on her emotions. Then she added, "And the most awful thing is, there's not a damned thing I

can do to change it."

All the way home Laura refused to think about the fact that Kyle Patterson had rejected her for his weapons operation. She lived on the North Side of the city, and rented a flat on the second floor in one of the older buildings. A family of five resided below her, a husband, wife, and three little kids, two boys and a girl. Sometimes the boys would wait for her with a toy or a trick. They all called her "Occifer Lady-Friendly."

But today the kids weren't around. She unlocked the street door and went up the steps. She left her front door open—as she did most of the time—and started stripping off her dark blue police uniform as she walked through her living room and down the hall into her bedroom.

A shower would feel good. Then she would cook something for dinner. Then she would think about being rejected for the undercover operation.

She took a long shower and after drying herself, put on a short dressing robe, wrapped a towel around her head, and wandered into her kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and was shocked by a fierce-looking monster standing on one of the shelves. From the fanged jowls dripped iridescent green slime. The trio from downstairs must have planted the monster last night, when they'd come up for a short visit. She could almost see Timmy and Danny laughing.

Laura closed the door on Attila the Slime-Hun when her doorbell rang. Thinking it was Cassie, she went to press the buzzer controlling the bottom door.

"Come on up." She went to the landing and shouted down the stairs. "If you've got a good, strong stomach we can share Attila's treasure for din—"

"Hello, Laura," Kyle Patterson said, rounding the final step and appearing at her doorway.

Laura stood staring at him. She drew her robe tightly around her, trying to shield her emotions more than her body. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to explain to you about this afternoon."

"What's to explain? I'm obviously not qualified for the position. I don't see any sense in going over the details."

"What if I told you I'd changed my mind?" he asked.

For a moment Laura was speechless. "What do you mean, changed your mind?" she said slowly.

"I've decided to give you a chance at the operation."

Anger shot through her. "I want to be chosen for my qualifications, not because you feel sorry for me."

"Look, Laura," he said, "I was wrong this afternoon. I've reviewed your qualifications, and I've decided that you're right. You haven't done anything wrong. You were the victim, and we've been treating you unfairly. I've been treating you unfairly. Like everyone else I was . . . am very uncomfortable about what happened to you."

"I don't know what to say," she said truthfully.

"How about thanks?"

She gave a brief shrug, still shocked. "Thank you."

He nodded. "You're welcome. We'll be going over the details of the operation seven o'clock tomorrow morning at my office in the Federal Building. Can you make it?"

"I'll have to check with Captain Warner."

"I've already notified him that you're going to be part of the detail. The others are Jim Hines, Stan Smith and a vice cop named Phyllis Taylor."

"Any ATF agents?"

"Two. We'll work closely with the branch office here in the city. We can use

the central police station for technical support—but we'll work out of the federal office complex."

"Okay." Laura nodded. "We should make a great team."

"Right." Kyle hesitated. "Laura, what happened to your ring?"

She glanced at her hand. "What ring?"

"Your engagement ring. When I was here last fall you were wearing one."

Her engagement had been another casualty of that night. "You know how it goes. Cops and marriage don't mix."

"Did you break it up or was it him?"

"Him, but he was right. We weren't meant for each other." Why was this so important to him?

"I see," Kyle was silent. "I was wondering what you were doing tonight," he said abruptly.

"Tonight?" She frowned. "Why?"

"I thought we might go for a cup of coffee." He shrugged. "Sort of get to know each other."

So that was his game! "I'm sorry, Kyle. I'm thrilled to be working with you on the operation, but I'm not interested in anything else."

"I'm just offering you a cup of coffee."

Sure. And the earth was flat. "Excuse me, Kyle, who else did you say is in on this operation?"

"Hines, Stan, Phyllis and two ATF agents."

She smiled, crossing her arms smugly over her chest. "Tell me, did you go for coffee with them?"

He smiled, too. "Yes, I did. We'll be working together," he went on to explain. "In order to do that effectively, there's a lot we need to know about each other."

True, particularly when their lives were dependent on that knowledge. Laura stared at him trying to decide.

"So, are you free?"

"Yes," she said. She stepped back, welcoming him into her apartment. "I'll

get dressed."

"Take your time."

When Laura got to her bedroom, she pulled on slacks, a blouse that buttoned all the way up to her throat, and twisted her long blond hair in the tight knot she wore while on duty. If Dr. Lowenstein had been there, she'd say Laura was trying to put distance between herself and Kyle.

When she went back in the living room, Kyle was studying the photographs on her wall. "Family?"

"Yes, my father and brothers."

"They're all cops. Chicago?"

"Kansas City."

"You're a country girl?" He seemed surprised.

"Born and bred, although Kansas City isn't exactly country. Where are you from?"

"New York City by way of Miami and Detroit with a detour through Vietnam."

There had to be a wealth of stories in that answer, she thought as he glanced around her apartment.

"You have a nice place, here. It certainly beats a vagrant hotel uptown," he went on.

"Is that where you're staying?" With drunks and deadbeats and who knew what else? She stared at him.

He smiled. "It's not the greatest neighborhood, but I needed something right away. I'll look for an apartment soon."

"An apartment?" She frowned, confused. He was an ATF agent stationed in New York.

"I've been transferred to the Chicago Bureau," he explained. "Since I'm here for good, so to speak, I think I'm going to need something a little more homey than the Wilson Arms. Maybe you could help me look for a place later," he remarked as they went out the door and down the steps. "If you have the time."

She didn't answer as they walked outside. Kyle pointed to a silver Ford Thun-

derbird down the street. They walked to it and got in. After starting the motor, he said, "Is there a nice restaurant nearby?"

"There are several over on Irving Park Road."

He pulled away from the curb, weaving into traffic. Dusk was falling, and he flipped on the lights. "Do you want to listen to the radio?"

"No, this is fine. We're almost there." She indicated a restaurant on the corner. "They have good pie, if you're interested in more than coffee."

"Pie sounds great." He turned into a parking lot, and found an empty parking space. "One thing about Chicago," he remarked, "there's always a chance you'll find a parking spot. In New York nobody drives because there's never any parking spots."

She laughed. "Did you like New York?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess so. I don't have any ties so it doesn't really matter where I live."

"No family?"

"Just a sister. She's happily married, though, and lives in California."

Kyle opened her door, and they went into the cafe which was packed with people having dinner. But they got a booth and ordered coffee. Kyle asked for peach pie. Thinking of the treat waiting for her at home in her refrigerator, Laura did too.

After the waitress left, she glanced at Kyle. He was busy looking around. She'd noticed he seemed constantly aware of where he was and what was going on. Was it something he'd learned as an agent?

"How did you become an agent?"

"By accident." He smiled. "I'm supposed to be getting to know you, Laura."

"It works both ways."

He paused. Then he said, "I kind of drifted into my job. When I got back from Vietnam, I decided to settle in Miami, simply because it was warm there. I joined

the police force, worked as a detective and met up with an agent from ATF. The Bureau sounded new, something challenging. I guess I was ready for a change."

"Is it really different?"

"Not really. It's still drugs and sex and murder, only the cast of characters has changed. Instead of the Miami mob we have the New York mob. Instead of crack it's illegal guns. What made a country girl become a cop?"

"I'm *not* a country girl," she corrected him again. "And I moved to the big city so I could become a cop."

"Doesn't Kansas City have a police department?"

"My father and brothers are all cops. Macho cops," she clarified. "They thought of me as a daughter and a little sister who cooked meals and cleaned house."

"No mother?" Their pie and coffee had arrived, and he started eating.

"Oh, yes, but a woman's work is in the home."

He shook his head. "I didn't think there were any of those men left in this world."

"They're a dying breed, thank goodness."

"Are you a feminist?"

She considered. "I don't know. I'm independent."

"That's a good quality. Do you have any hobbies?"

She hadn't been asked that question in years, not since she'd filled out the application for the police department. She laughed. "Yes. Tell me yours first."

"Sailing."

"As in boats?"

"Uh-huh. I'm docked at Wilson Harbor."

"You're living at a vagrant hotel because you didn't have time to look for an apartment and yet you brought your boat with you from New York?"

"I guess that shows my priorities. Actu-

ally, I live on my boat in good weather. I haven't spent much time at the Wilson Arms. Have you ever been sailing?"

"No."

"Would you like to go out on the lake tomorrow after work? It's supposed to be a nice day."

Coffee was one thing; sailing on his boat quite another. Yet Kyle didn't seem in the least interested in her sexually. He hadn't even allowed their fingers to touch when they simultaneously reached for the cream.

"Yes, I'd like that," she said at last, perhaps because he was giving her so much space.

"Dress warm."

"I thought you said it was supposed to be a nice day."

"It is, but this is May. The lake is still cold, and it's pretty windy out there."

"You're staying on your boat now?"

He nodded. He had finished eating and sat there staring at her. Suddenly, he asked, "Are you over the trauma?"

Laura held a forkful of pie halfway to her mouth. She could only hope her hand didn't shake as she placed the uneaten pie carefully on the plate. "Yes."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be without being put to the test."

"I suppose that's a fair enough answer," he said after a long moment. "You realize it was an important question for all of us involved in the operation?"

"Yes, I know."

"There'll be inquiries from the group."

She nodded. "I understand."

"Good." For the next several moments Kyle concentrated on his coffee. Then he checked his watch. "As much as I enjoy sitting here, I really do have to get back. I've got to prepare some papers for tomorrow's meeting."

She knew he felt her discomfort and was giving her an out. "I should get back

home, too. Cassie said she might come over."

"Who's Cassie?"

"A friend. She'll love Attila."

The ride back to her apartment took only a few minutes. He walked her to the outside door, waiting as she searched her purse for her keys. She unlocked the door and turned to him. "Thanks for the coffee, Kyle. I'm glad we went."

"So am I."

"I should also thank you for giving me a chance to prove myself. I appreciate that. And I'm sorry for some of the things I said to you this afternoon."

"Bang-bang?"

"Bang-bang."

He smiled. "See you tomorrow."

"Yes," she murmured. "Tomorrow."

The Federal Building where Laura was supposed to meet everyone was in the downtown area of Chicago. When she got off the elevator, she was surprised to discover that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms looked like a secretarial pool at a large corporation. Since the hour was so early, the place was empty.

Laura found Kyle, along with everyone else picked for the operation, in a large, darkened briefing room off to one side. Kyle nodded to her as she entered. After tossing out introductions, he walked to the front of the room.

"The first thing we need to do," he said, "is to discuss the details of the operation. What I have in mind is fairly simple. We're going to buy some guns. Naturally we're going to have to put the word out on the street that we're interested in weapons and I want the word out that a bunch of revolutionaries are looking."

"Revolutionaries?" Phyllis repeated incredulously.

Kyle nodded. "If whoever's running this deal thinks a cause is buying, they're likely to try to make a big sale, and maybe

we can get the head honcho."

"Sounds great," she answered, "but aren't we the wrong ethnic group?"

Kyle laughed. "We're going to pretend to be from Canada." Nodding to one of the men he'd introduced earlier he said, "Our identification papers are already in the works, thanks to Sam. I figure we ought to be unhappy with the Canadian government and have a plan to bomb some government buildings and take hostages. We've come here looking for weapons because we've heard the shopping's good and the price is right."

He went on. "We've had a telephone installed in this room, and Scott will monitor it. If anybody asks, this will be the number we give. In the event that someone does contact us, Scott will notify me immediately. I'll have a beeper and then I'll call each of you. When we go, we go together."

Stan looked directly at Laura and said, "This is a dangerous operation."

"Yes, it is," Kyle acknowledged. "When we hit the street we go by pairs," he went on as if totally undisturbed by the suggestion of danger. "Phyllis will hook up with Sam. Stan and Jim stay together. That leaves Laura and me. Is that all right with everyone?"

Laura frowned. Had he planned it that way? And if he did, why? To show his faith in her? He seemed so casual about the assignments she couldn't tell.

"Won't someone get suspicious when we ask about Uzis?" Laura spoke up at last. "What about the coincidence of the guns being stolen and us wanting them?"

"We aren't going to inquire about Uzis," Kyle explained. "We're simply looking for firepower. I'm hoping that greed will make whoever is behind this try to unload the guns on us."

Kyle flipped on a projector. "Now we need to know our product. By the time you leave here, you'll all be experts."

For the next several hours they watched films of Uzis, from manufacture, to distribution, including the names of importers. When the movies were over, he distributed folders. Inside were more pictures of the weapon. Next he circulated details of the theft. Then more documentation.

Sandwiches were delivered. Still Kyle didn't stop. By the time lunch was finished, Laura had seen so many photographs and heard so much technical data her brain felt numb. Finally he paused. "Any questions?"

"If we admit to it, will you show us more movies?" Phyllis asked. "Or are we done for the day?"

"Your life might just depend on those movies," Kyle said, "but yes, we're almost done. I've made arrangements with Captain Warner for a demonstration firing of the Uzi in the morning. I'd like for each of you to qualify with your street weapon at that time, just in case you've gotten rusty. Then we'll hit the streets to see what we can dig up. See you all then. Have a good evening."

Laura started for the door, but Kyle called to her. "You weren't leaving, were you?"

"I thought we were finished."

"We are. If you'll give me another second or so, I'll give you a lift home, and you can get your sweater."

She stared at him blankly. "My sweater?"

"Weren't we going sailing?"

She'd totally forgotten. She frowned and glanced at her watch. "It's really late."

"We'll be just in time for sunset. And you can wear one of my sweaters."

"I don't want to make the same kind of faux pas I did last night, but do you really think it's a good idea for us to see each other on a personal basis?" she asked. "We're going to be partners on an operation."

"Which is exactly the reason we *should* see each other on a personal basis," he countered. "We can go over our cover together. That way we won't waste valuable meeting time learning each other's little quirks."

"What kind of little quirks are you talking about?"

He shrugged. "Silly stuff, like I have a thing about popcorn. And serious stuff, like I always walk down the right side of the street."

She smiled at him. "Always?"

"Actually, it helps if I have to draw my weapon. I keep my gun on the left. And you?"

"I quick-draw from my Louis Vuitton."

"What's that?"

"A purse."

He laughed. "See? We both have a lot to learn. So what do you say? Want to go sailing?"

"Sure," she answered. And all of a sudden going sailing with Kyle sounded wonderful.

The harbor was crowded with boats. Everything from tall-masted sailboats to huge luxury yachts. Out on the lake more boats dotted the horizon, looking like tiny white spots in the gathering dusk.

Several people waved to Kyle as they walked along the pier. He smiled and waved back. "It's a different world down here. Everybody's friendly," he said.

They walked past several yachts. When Kyle got to a long, sleek boat that rode high in the water, he grabbed a rope and pulled the craft closer. "Well, here's home."

Laura didn't know anything about boats, but she estimated this one to be about thirty feet long. It was single masted and was painted black. She noticed *Water Witch* painted in gold letters on the back.

Kyle hopped onto the deck and held out his hand for Laura. "Welcome aboard."

She took his hand and jumped. The boat bobbed, and it took her a few moments to get her balance.

Kyle led her to a padded bench on one side of the boat. She was grateful for the seat and glanced around. "It's beautiful."

"She," he corrected. "Boats are female."

Laura smiled. "Why did you name her *Water Witch*?"

"She's a bit magical. She weaves spells. Come on, I'll show you around."

Below deck, things were just as neat as above. The tiny kitchen—or galley, as Kyle corrected—was spotless. He explained that the stove was weighted, and turned, staying level even when the boat leaned to one side. His bunk, which seemed very wide, was tightly made up, and his clothes fit nicely into a wardrobe along the wall. Everything was compact, organized.

After she'd put on one of his sweaters they went back up the steps to the deck. "If we don't get out on the lake soon, we're going to miss the sunset," he said, tossing the ropes that held them to the pier. He turned a key to start the engines and expertly navigated out of his berth around the other boats. After they got beyond the breakwater, he cut the engine and unfurled the sails. "Ready?"

Laura nodded. "Sure."

"Hold on," Kyle called as the wind caught the sails and the boat cut a swath through the waves. He laughed as the boat leaned to one side, dangerously close to toppling into the water. Laura must have turned green because all of a sudden he righted the boat, whipped down the sails, and secured them. "Did you want to see the sunset? Turn around. We're just in time."

Although Laura clung to the seat, she turned and was awed by the sight. The sun was half buried in the horizon, staining everything around with brilliant hues of

color.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Laura could only stare. The Chicago skyline was almost as lovely as the sunset. Spires of tall buildings reached for the sky, and as the boat bobbed, they seemed to dip and rise. She watched as the ball of fire disappeared and lights began to twinkle from the city.

"This is the time I like best, when the day disappears," Kyle said. "It's like a whole other world out here. All the big city problems seem so far away. Do you feel the magic?"

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, I do."

"There's something about the night and the stars," he went on softly, reaching to brush her hair back. She sat paralyzed by his voice and his nearness.

He leaned toward her. She was certain he was going to kiss her, and she didn't know what to do.

"Laura, I—" His lips were but a breath away. She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat. All of a sudden, as though catching himself, he drew back. "God, I'm sorry, Laura. I didn't mean for that to happen."

Yet nothing had happened. Nothing really, except that she'd wanted his embrace, yearned for it. Startled by her reaction to him, she jumped up and went to the rail.

Kyle moved behind her. She could sense his presence. "I'm sorry, Laura," he said again. "I had no right to touch you. I had no right to kiss you."

"You didn't kiss me, Kyle," she corrected. "You turned away from me."

"I hurt you, didn't I?"

Should she tell the truth? She hurt so badly she couldn't describe it. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you, Laura."

"That's the way it goes, I guess. The funny thing is, I'm not tainted. I don't even have a disease. It may be hard to be-

lieve, but Tony Calimara was very picky about his women."

"You think . . . ?" He seemed stunned by her revelation. "Laura, I didn't mean it that way!"

"No? How did you mean it, Kyle? How else could you mean it?" She sighed and stared off into the distance. "I think we should go back now."

"Don't you think we should talk? Let me into your life, Laura," he said softly. "Let me help you."

All of a sudden Laura saw red. "Why?" she asked, whipping around to face him. "Why should I let you into my life? You're afraid to touch me. My body was violated, but I'm still a human being with wants and needs."

"Laura, I understand."

"Be honest, Kyle. Did you want to kiss me just now?"

"Laura, this is silly."

"Is it? Why is it silly to want a man to kiss you? To touch you? Kiss me, Kyle."

"I can't."

"Why?" She moved closer to him, touching him. "Because I was raped? Touch me, Kyle. Kiss me. Do something. Help me."

Maybe it was her cry for help, but something broke Kyle's resistance, and with an agonized sigh, he pressed his mouth to hers almost brutally.

For all her pleas, the impact of his embrace was devastating to Laura's senses and she shuddered in reaction.

Kyle was the one to pull away. He stood staring at her with a distraught expression. "Laura, I'm sorry."

Turning away, she laughed shakily, trying to make light of the situation. "Well, that was certainly honest."

"Laura, listen to me." He started to take her hand but she snatched it away.

"Don't touch me!" She gasped when she realized what she'd said. "God, I'm sorry. I must sound like a schizophrenic.

Touch me. Don't touch me."

"I'm sorry."

"Dammit, Kyle, would you please stop apologizing." Just barely holding herself together, Laura rushed down the steps into the cabin and into the tiny bathroom. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, letting the tears silently roll down her face. After a while, she heard Kyle come below deck and move around. She had to face him sometime. She opened the door and walked out.

He was standing near the stove. He glanced at her. "I've heated some apple cider."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll pass," she answered. "Do you think we could head back to shore now? It's really getting late."

If he heard her, he didn't respond to her question. "I've put down the anchor. Your fiance broke off your engagement because you were raped, didn't he?" he continued.

There was no sense lying now, she realized. "Yes."

"Did you love him?"

"I thought I loved him."

"Do you ever talk about it, Laura?"

"Yes, sometimes." To her therapist. To Cassie.

"Could we talk?"

But never to a man. "I'm sorry, Kyle. None of this was your fault, and I shouldn't have thrown myself at you like that. It's really out of character for me." When he didn't answer she said, "I hope you'll still give me a chance at the operation."

"The operation has nothing to do with what happened up there on deck. That was between us. You and me. I'm still willing to be your partner."

"Thank you." She was surprised, and grateful.

"But we still have to talk," he went on.

"Kyle—"

"This is difficult for me, Laura. It's difficult for me to explain, but I feel things for you, things that I'm afraid would frighten you." He shoved his hands in his pockets and started to pace back and forth. "We need to get things straight between us, Laura."

"For the operation?"

He nodded. "Yes, and for us personally. We've only known each other a short time, but we'd be fools if we didn't admit that there's more than an operation between us. If we're going to have a chance, any chance at all, as partners or as more than partners, we've got to get things out in the open. I have to know how you feel and you have to know how I feel. We have to talk."

"All right," she answered quietly. "What do you want to talk about?"

"First of all I feel responsible for you," he admitted, "for what happened to you that night last fall. It was my plan, and it went wrong."

"You don't have to feel guilty, Kyle."

"Don't you understand, Laura? I can't help how I feel. I'm all mixed up inside, maybe as mixed up as you are. I feel things for you, things I'm not sure you're ready for. But I feel them. I've felt them all along, while you were engaged and now, too, and I think you feel them, also. And you're just as frightened as I am.

"Look, I'm going to be honest," he went on. "The truth is, Laura, despite being your partner and despite what happened to you, I want to make love to you. I want to know you, completely, totally, but I know you've been hurt. I know you've been raped. I listened, while he violated you, and I couldn't help you."

"I've gotten over that part of it."

"I haven't. And it's killing me inside." He paused. "The reason I don't want to touch you is that I couldn't stand it if you cringed from me. When I felt you shudder

earlier, I wanted to kill Tony Calimara."

"And it went against everything you believe in."

"Yes."

"Very uncoplike. I know the feeling. It goes away."

"Does it? Isn't that what you're afraid of, Laura? Of blowing it when you're faced with a situation that reminds you of that night?"

Laura was amazed at how astute he was. "Yes."

"We're quite a pair, aren't we?"

She laughed. "Yes, we are."

Kyle didn't say much on the way back to the docks, and neither did Laura. After securing the *Water Witch* against the pier, Kyle helped her from the craft and side by side, they walked to his car.

"I'd take a bus home," she said, "but I don't think there are any that go to my apartment from here."

"Don't worry. It's no problem to take you home."

Laura didn't remark, and the small exchange seemed to be the sum total of their conversation for the ride to her apartment. "Don't forget that we're going to be qualifying at the range in the morning," he reminded her as he parked in front of her building.

She started to get out of the car, but he came around and opened her door. "I'll walk you to your door."

"I can manage."

"I know you can." He smiled. "Let me be polite." He casually placed his hand on her back, guiding her along as they headed up her front steps. When they got to the entrance she turned to him and smiled.

"Thanks again, Kyle. The sunset was lovely."

"You're welcome," he answered. He had shoved his hands in his pockets, and he nodded toward the vestibule. "Sure you'll get in all right?"

"I'll be fine."

"Well, I guess I'll say good-night, then."

"Yes, good-night."

She stared at his lips as they descended to her.

"I'm going to kiss you. Trust me, Laura," he murmured as their breath mingled together. "Let me kiss you."

She stood stock-still.

"Let me kiss you," he repeated huskily. "Let me show you how it can feel." He brushed his lips across hers so lightly he might have used a feather, yet the contact was electric. Kyle trailed his lips along her neck, kissing her lightly there, too, yet barely touching her. His hand, so warm and strong, cupped her head and caressed her cheek. He moved his fingers down along her throat to the top of her breast. She didn't move. She didn't flinch. Pleasure coursed through her.

Kyle drew away. "I'd better go," he said, his tone ragged and husky. "Before I can't."

Laura drew a shaky breath and answered, "Yes. That's a good idea."

He touched her cheek lightly and brushed back a stray lock of hair. "Good-night, Laura."

"Good-night," she whispered.

Because the team was meeting downtown at the central police station, Laura dressed casually, in a skirt and blouse. Like the day before, everyone had already arrived when she walked into the station. The target range was in the basement. The area was soundproofed and it was darkened, except for the targets, which were lit and which moved and changed at the flick of a switch in the control room.

Kyle stood near a khaki-clad officer who was from the SWAT team and held an Uzi submachine gun in front of him. He nodded to the officer. "We're ready."

Without fanfare the man whirled to the

target, squeezing the trigger. Before she could take a breath, the officer had emptied the clip and shoved in another. In a fraction of a second, he emptied the second clip.

"This probably wasn't necessary," Kyle said when the man had totally destroyed the target. "You're all very aware of the firepower of this weapon. I just wanted to remind you that it's in the hands of people who intend to misuse it and that we need to catch them before anyone gets hurt. Now, we'll all take turns." He glanced at Laura. "Mind being first?"

She stepped forward without hesitation. "Sure." Laura carried a .38 revolver, Chicago Police Department issue. The target lit up, moved forward, then back, simulating someone running away. She had only a moment to aim. She fired. More targets popped up and she kept firing.

When the lights went on, Kyle examined the targets. Each one had a hole through the bull's-eye. "Very good." He turned to Stan. "Ready?"

The MEG officer glanced at Laura with new respect. "She's going to be hard to beat."

No one did beat her. Kyle came close, missing the center of a bull's-eye by only a hair. He turned to them after he had examined his own cardboard figure. "Looks like we're ready. Any questions?"

Jim shook his head. "Let's hit the streets."

"Fine," Kyle nodded and handed out their driver's licenses and passports. "We'll meet at the Federal Building later tonight to exchange information." Kyle handed a map to each person. The west side of the city had been divided into small two or three block areas. "Laura and I will take the north sector. Sam and Phyllis, take the south. Jim and Stan hit the east. We'll worry about the last sector in the morning." He held out his arm as though

waiting for her to join him. "Laura."

She walked to his side. When everyone left she placed her hand on his arm.

"You know something, Laura?" He looked at her with new respect. "I was really impressed by how darned fast you are on the draw."

But not fast enough, she thought, or she would never have let him into her life.

Once they arrived at their designated area, Kyle was all business. They talked with person after person, walked to shop after shop, pretending to be Canadian revolutionaries asking about weapons. No one seemed to be interested.

"I don't know nothin' about bullets, mister," a pawnshop owner remarked when Kyle asked about getting some ammunition. "Never heard of the stuff."

Kyle handed the man a piece of paper with the office phone number scrawled on it. "You can reach us here if you ever do hear of some weapons." He took out a wad of money. "We're willing to pay a premium price."

The man stared at him. "You buying something?"

"My wife likes that ring." Kyle pointed to a cheap pearl that wasn't worth ten dollars. "Don't you, honey?"

Laura nodded. "Yes. It's lovely."

"She's got good taste." The man pulled the ring from the case. "So what do you need bullets for?"

"A revolution."

"Got something against the Canadian government?"

"I'm tired of paying taxes."

"You should move to the United States, mister. We get robbed blind here."

Kyle shrugged, peeling five hundred-dollar bills and placing them on the counter with his driver's license, which listed him as a Canadian citizen.

The man didn't bite, though. The money sat on the counter. Although he did

pocket the phone number. "Did you want to buy something else?"

"I thought you said the ring was five hundred."

"You heard wrong, buddy. Three hundred's plenty. Now, if you don't want anything else, maybe you better get the hell out of here. I can't afford to be busted for dealing with revolutionaries."

"Sure thing," Kyle said, placing his hand on Laura's back and escorting her to the door. "Keep in touch."

"Yeah. I'll give you a call."

It was too good to be true. When they got outside Laura glanced at Kyle. "Something about him bothered me. Did you catch his name? It was on one of the cards he had on the counter."

"Morgan."

"That's what I thought."

"It's a common name," Kyle said as he nodded to another pawnshop down the block. "Let's head for that shop over there."

They repeated the same act for several more pawnbrokers. At last Kyle headed for the car. "We better knock off for the day and meet the others. It'll take us a year to get back downtown." He glanced at her. "Tired?"

Laura nodded. "Yes, I am. I didn't sleep well last night." She flushed.

Kyle smiled. "Neither did I. I had a problem with dreams." He helped her into the car and got in his side. He put the car in gear and pulled into the lane of traffic. "Does your family know what happened to you?"

Laura hesitated. "No."

"Why not?"

Why did he have to probe? "I don't know. Bringing it out in the open isn't as easy as it sounds," she answered. "As far as my family is concerned, knowing about what happened to me would only worry them. They'd want me to come home."

"And you don't want to do that."

"I like Chicago. I do miss Kansas City sometimes, but I'm not a country girl."

"You're old-fashioned."

"No, I'm not," she scoffed.

"Sure you are. You're straitlaced, straightforward, and trusting."

"You make them seem like bad qualities."

"On the contrary, I think they're excellent qualities. I'm just surprised that with everything that's happened to you, you're still so . . . innocent. And *that*, combined with how sexy you are, is a dynamite combination."

"No one's ever told me that before."

"How about that jerk who jilted you?"

"I might point out that you couldn't have kissed me last night if he hadn't jilted me."

Kyle arched an eyebrow. "Don't count on it, Laura," he said in a low voice. "I don't think I could have kept away from you, no matter who you were engaged to." He paused. "Or who you were married to."

"That bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Another man's woman should be off limits."

"I see." She paused. "Have you ever been in love, Kyle?"

They had reached the street where the Federal Building was located. He pulled into a nearby parking garage and turned to her. "No, I've never been in love."

"You've had relationships, though."

He nodded. "Yes. Does it matter?"

She wasn't certain why it did matter or even how she would react to his answer. "I don't know."

"I think you're scared. I think you're looking for reasons to run away from what's happening between us."

"What is happening between us, Kyle?" she asked. "We've known each other for only three days. Maybe we're imagining this."

"Say it, Laura. This what?"

She found it terribly hard to speak the words. "This . . . sensuality," she said at last. "Wanting each other."

"I do want you, Laura," he admitted. "I also know you want me." He took her hand and placed it over his heart. It was hammering full speed. Then he placed his hand over her heart, which was pounding just as hard.

"It's just lust," she suggested.

"I don't deny that I lust for you." He pressed her hand to the bulge between his legs, leaving no doubt about his claim. "I don't mean to shock you, but I'm not going to let you go until we've got things cleared up between us. You already know that I want you. But sex isn't all I want from you, Laura Davis. There's more than sex between us. You can't shut me out of your life; I won't let you. What we feel for each other is right and beautiful, and maybe we don't know exactly what it is yet, but it's real, whether we've known each other for three days or three years."

"I'm just not sure, Kyle. I have so many doubts. I want you and I don't want you. I'm scared, and yet I'm practically throwing myself at you. I don't know you; I don't know me; I don't know what we're doing."

"We can give it more time, if that's what you want. I can back off. That's a problem I've had to deal with since the moment I saw you seven months ago. But the bottom line is, I want you, and I'm willing to wait."

"For how long?"

"However long it takes."

Someone knocked on the car window. "What are you two doing?" Phyllis called. "Solving the problems of the world? The meeting's supposed to be upstairs."

Kyle laughed and took Laura's hand. "Let's go, Officer Davis. It's time to get back to work."

Jim and Stan arrived at the Bureau of

fices right behind Kyle and Laura. When they had all grabbed a cup of coffee, Stan turned to her.

"That was good shooting this morning."

"Thanks," Laura answered.

"I don't know if anyone mentioned this to you, but I wasn't too thrilled with you being part of this detail. I know now that was a mistake on my part. You're damned good, and you deserve a chance."

Kyle called to them before Laura could respond. "Gather round, folks." He sat on the edge of a desk again. "Okay, let's hear it. Did anyone hit pay dirt?"

Unfortunately no one had any luck.

Kyle sighed. "I suppose we can't expect results in one day. Let's go home. We'll meet here tomorrow at the same time and hit the streets about midday. Laura and I will take the west sector. The rest of you work what you had today."

Except for the man monitoring the telephone, they all filed out of the room. But before she could leave, Kyle took hold of her arm. "Hi. Ready?"

"For what?"

"We could catch the sunset again."

She chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Kyle, if I go to the boat with you tonight, you'll end up making love to me," she murmured. "You know it as well as I do."

"Tell you what," Kyle suggested, "let's go watch the sunset from the park. There'll be lots of people around, and you don't have to go near the boat. You can leave whenever you want."

Laura nodded. "I'd like that."

"Good." He took her hand. "Let's go."

They picked up chicken and trimmings at a fast-food restaurant and drove to the park that adjoined the harbor. While Laura fixed their plates at a picnic table, Kyle went to the boat for a blanket. After they ate, they spread the blanket under a tree and sat watching the sun disappear from the sky.

Even though darkness closed in, Laura felt comfortable being with him. Without thinking, she leaned her head against his shoulder as lights were turned on in the buildings. As the night descended, people left the park and then Kyle and Laura were alone.

Laura knew she should move away, but she stayed in the protective circle of his arms. She wasn't certain how it happened, but all of a sudden they weren't sitting on the blanket anymore. Kyle had lowered her gently to the ground, and she was staring up at him. She could feel the warmth of his body next to hers, and she wanted to touch him, to place her hand on his chest and feel his heart beating.

"Let's get that kiss out of the way, Laura."

Her breath stopped in her throat as she watched his mouth close the gap between them. At first the kiss was gentle, his lips barely brushing across hers. Then, as he gathered her close and increased the pressure of his mouth on hers, sensations surged through her, and she moaned and arched against him. She couldn't think. All she could do was feel and yearn for more.

"Please," she murmured, not even knowing what she was pleading for.

"What, love?"

"I . . ."

Another gasp escaped her as he trailed his hand across her breast and down across her stomach, caressing, probing. Her skirt was hitched up around her thighs and his fingers slipped easily between her legs. She felt as though a hot brand had touched her.

Then Kyle groaned and clutched her tightly to his body. "Laura," he cried hoarsely. "Oh, God, Laura; I can't hold back anymore."

Whether it was the intensity of his embrace that frightened her or rationality finally returning, Laura suddenly felt fear

rush through her. "Please," she said, "don't." She pushed against his chest. "Kyle, stop."

Kyle drew back. "What's wrong, Laura?"

She sat up and drew a ragged breath. "This. Us. Kyle, I'm sorry. I can't do this."

At first he didn't say anything. She felt his silence envelop her like the night, dark, lonely, and empty. Finally he said softly, "No, I'm sorry, Laura. I should have controlled myself."

She shook her head. "This doesn't have anything to do with how you acted. It doesn't have anything to do with my having been raped."

That was a lie and she knew it. The terror she had felt had everything to do with her being raped, but she couldn't admit it, not to him, not even to herself.

"Laura?" When he touched her arm she had to steel herself not to cringe. "Are you sure?"

Moving away, she tried to readjust her blouse and tuck it into her skirt, but her movements were ineffective. "Look, maybe you're right. Maybe I am old-fashioned. Please understand, you haven't done anything wrong, but I need to go home. I need to get away from you for a while."

"All right," he answered softly. "Go."

Laura left him with a kiss and caught a cab, deeply shaken. All the way home she tried very hard not to think about what had happened between her and Kyle, and what *might* have happened between them had she let it. Unfortunately she wasn't very successful. By the time she unlocked her front door, she was more upset than she had been in the park.

Her hands trembled so that she could hardly turn the key. She pushed open the door and stepped into the vestibule. A huge, hairy, spider brushed against her face. Not realizing it was fake, she gasped

and batted at the thing until it jerked off of its string and fell onto the floor.

Laura stared at the spider while her heart resumed normal speed, and she caught her breath. The thing was rubber, and it had scared her to death. Drawing a deep sigh, she picked it up and turned it over in her palm, studying the hairy legs. The thing was supposed to be scary but it was really nothing. Suddenly she tossed it aside. Why hadn't she realized it before? Her fear was nothing, too, because it could be conquered. It couldn't possess her unless she let it.

What a fool she'd been. If she wanted any chance at all at a normal life, she had to meet this crisis head-on. She was going to go to Kyle and face him, and this time she wasn't going to run away. She could only hope that he would let her in.

How did you knock on a boat? Laura stared at the long, sleek craft bobbing up and down in the water. It was late so she didn't want to call to Kyle and wake up the entire harbor. She was chickening out again, Laura realized, looking for excuses to allow her to go back home, and it disgusted her. She'd never been a coward before. *She'd never gone to a man with the express purpose of making love before, either.*

"Kyle," she called softly, leaning over the narrow gap of water between the boat and the dock, and tapping on the dark hull. "Kyle, are you home?"

Suddenly, he came through the doorway, hurriedly snapping his pants. "Laura, is that you?"

"Hi," she said, trying to smile.

"Hi, yourself," he answered. "What's up?"

Taking a deep breath, she gestured around at the boats. "Everybody's asleep."

He nodded. "It's late. How did you get here?"

Had she made a mistake in coming? Chewing her lips nervously she said, "I took a cab."

"You should have called."

"You have a phone?"

"Yes."

"Oh," she said, forcing another smile. She'd thought he'd be happy to see her, but he just stood there staring at her. "Aren't you going to invite me aboard?"

"No."

She hadn't expected that answer. "Why not?"

He didn't respond to her question. "Wait a minute. I'll get my car keys and take you back home."

"I don't want to go home," she said sharply.

He stared at her.

"Look." She gestured at the boat. "Isn't it kind of silly for me to be standing here on shore and for you to be standing there on that boat when we could both be standing there together?"

The small craft bobbed up and down while he contemplated her words. "Laura, if I let you come on board this boat, I won't be able to keep my hands off you. We'll end up making love."

"I know." She swallowed the lump of apprehension in her throat. "I was hoping you'd have that problem."

"You're sure that's what you want?"

"Uh huh," she nodded.

She let him lead her into the cabin, where he studied her then chuckled, loud and long. "God, I love you," he said.

"Pardon me?"

"I love you. Is that so surprising?"

Laura stood with her mouth open as he turned up the lanterns.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

"Getting ready," he answered. "I want to see every inch of you when I make love to you."

"Oh."

"Oh, is right." He leaned against the

counter, legs spread wide, and studied her. "Come here, Laura."

Mesmerized by his gaze, she walked slowly toward him, stopping only when her body brushed his. She licked her lips in the one sign of nervousness she allowed to show as he pressed her hips against his thighs. She could feel his arousal, hard against her softness, but she refused to succumb to fear.

"I'm here," she said softly. "What should I do?"

"Nothing," he murmured hoarsely. "Just stand here and let me look at you." He touched her cheek. "I want to feel you. You're so soft, Laura, so beautiful. I love you. I don't know how it happened or when, but I love you. I think I've loved you since the day I met you."

"I love you, Kyle," she whispered.

"I don't need to hear it, Laura."

"But it's true," she said, surprised to realize she was speaking the truth. "I do love you."

"I'm glad." Kyle trailed his hand down her cheek and along the smooth column of her throat. Slowly he started to undo the buttons of her blouse one by one. "It's all right to be afraid."

She felt uncomfortable as his gaze traveled over her and yet at the same time, desire raged through her.

"Are you still sure this is what you want?"

"Yes." She leaned against him, but he pushed her away from his thighs, letting her skirt fall into a pool at her feet. She hadn't realized that he had already unzipped the garment. He tugged at her slip and panties, sliding them down her legs. "Lift your feet, Laura."

When she did as he asked, he tossed the garments out of their way and simply looked at her, stared at her almost reverently.

"God, you're beautiful," he said as he pulled the pins from her hair, letting it

down. "You have lovely hair." He stroked his hands through it. "So long and silky."

"Thank you."

"Soft. You're soft all over," he went on, placing his hands on her shoulders and running them down her arms, across her stomach, up to her breasts.

"Oh, God, Laura," he murmured, setting her gently away. "Let me get my pants off."

Laura felt her heart pound and her hands sweat as she waited for him to shrug out of his pants and shorts. She closed her eyes and commanded her feet not to move.

"Laura?" he called her name softly. "Look at me, Laura. Open your eyes."

Slowly she opened them, but she kept her gaze riveted to his face.

"Tell me about it now, Laura," he said softly. "Tell me about the rape. Talk to me."

"No, I can't!" She started to pull away from him.

"Oh, no, Laura, not now," he said firmly. "I won't let you go now. We've come too far."

Forcing herself, she stood still, quivering again as he pulled her against his hips. "You need to touch me, Laura, to know me." He stroked her hair gently, quieting her. "Now, we're both naked, stripped bare. There are no secrets between us. Tell me about the rape. What did he do?"

"Why are you doing this?" she cried. "You heard. You listened."

He held her firmly. "I'm sorry, Laura. I didn't mean to listen." But he didn't back off. "What did he do?"

"He just threw me on the sofa and—and did it," she said, sickened at the memory. "God, I hate him."

Kyle caressed her hair again. "There's nothing to be afraid of now," he went on, stroking her gently. "I won't hurt you, and I won't let anyone else hurt you, either."

"I wanted to die," she said, letting the

feelings out at last. "I felt so ashamed."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I know. I felt ashamed anyhow."

"Do you still feel ashamed?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I don't feel anything at all, except anger. And fear."

"How about desire?"

"I feel desire," she admitted. "I've felt it a lot lately."

"For me?"

"Yes. Kiss me. Make love to me."

Without further urging, he moved his mouth over hers. Still he was gentle, moving his lips back and forth, barely touching hers. The moments seemed like hours as he continued to draw out the embrace. She felt tense, on edge, as if she were going to explode with need. She wrapped her hands around his neck, trying to pull him closer.

"Kyle, I can't stand it. I can't wait."

"You're sure?"

"Yes! Yes. Yes. Please make love to me."

They were still standing up, leaning against a counter. All it took was a slight adjustment on her part, and he united them. She gasped at the shock of it as he filled her, and, she slumped her head against his shoulder as pleasure coursed through her veins.

She cried out as rapture claimed her, and her breath came in short gasps as he drew it out, until she crested and her body jerked in spasms of pleasure.

At the height of her passion, Kyle cried out, too, and clutched her close. "Oh, God, Laura."

He held her in his arms while they both came back to earth. It was a wonder to her that they were still standing. He backed her toward his bed. "Laura, love," he said huskily, "come to bed."

She opened her eyes and saw Kyle. He was awake, too, staring at her as though he'd been memorizing her features. They

had made love most of the night yet she didn't feel tired. She felt exhilarated. He had held her and caressed her until the memory of the rape had faded from her consciousness. It occurred to Laura that Kyle's touch felt as familiar as her skin. With his hands and lips he had stroked her body, discovering things about her that she didn't know herself. She felt as though she'd known him forever.

"Good morning," he said, leaning down to kiss her.

"Morning."

"Happy?"

"Very," she said, smiling.

Kyle kissed her. "Feel like breakfast?"

Realizing that she was hungry she glanced out the porthole just above their heads. The sky looked gray. "What time is it?"

"Dawn."

She'd wanted to see it with him, then she realized that in a way she had. "Surrender," she murmured.

"What?" Kyle asked.

"My father used to say 'Surrender the dawn.' I never understood its meaning until now."

"Which is?"

She looked at him. "It means time for renewal. A new day is beginning, the dawn of your life. Surrender, and bask in its sunshine."

"That's beautiful."

"Yes, it is," she agreed. "I just hope it's true."

"You'll do fine on the operation," he said, sensing her fears. "We're not going to let it go wrong."

"Can we do that, Kyle?"

"I believe we can do anything we set out to do. Together we can't miss."

She glanced out the porthole again as the sky began to grow light. She hoped he was right, because in a way, the entire operation could hinge on that statement. Although she was confident of herself as a

woman now, she had yet to put herself to the test on the streets.

And now that would be the most terrifying test of all.

Laura's street test came sooner than she anticipated. They had just finished eating breakfast when Kyle's beeper went off. Since Kyle was in the shower, and she didn't want to call the man monitoring the phone, implicitly announcing that she had spent the night with the boss, she went to the bathroom door and knocked softly. "Better hurry. It looks like we may have our fish."

"Did the beeper go off?" Kyle shut off the water.

"Loud and clear."

He opened the bathroom door and stepped out with a towel wrapped around his hips. "Did you call in?"

"No, I thought you'd better answer."

He arched an eyebrow at her as he headed for the telephone. Holding up one finger to alert her to the fact that the subject wasn't closed, he picked up the phone and punched out the number of the Bureau. "You heard from somebody?" he said to the person on the other end. "What's going down?"

"Okay," he said to the man after a few moments. "Sounds good. Alert the team. I'll meet everybody at the central police station in thirty minutes, and we'll decide who goes. We have to be careful. Could be they're trying to see if we're legitimate or if we're cops, and we sure don't want to tip our hand."

"Did we get a buy?" Laura asked after he hung up.

"Maybe. A pawnbroker's looking to unload a submachine gun. By the way, I thought we had decided we had more going for us than a sexual relationship."

Laura felt a stab of regret at the hurt look in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Kyle. I just didn't think it was wise to let the entire

team know what had happened between us."

"Aren't you proud of it?"

"Making love with a man is not something I can be proud of, Kyle, like a degree or an accomplishment. It's something that happened."

"I disagree. Love is an accomplishment, Laura. And making love is an expression of it."

She started to pace the floor. How could she explain her position? Her doubts? "Kyle, we don't know each other very well. We've just—"

"I know you well enough to realize that I want to spend the rest of my life with you," he said quietly.

She frowned. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Will you?"

"I don't know." She was suddenly nervous. "I—I hadn't given it any consideration."

"What's to consider?"

"Kyle, I—"

"Look," he cut in, moving close to her and stroking her cheek. "I know this is all strange and new to you. I don't mean to rush you. God knows, you're just getting yourself together, but please remember that I love you, Laura. I want to tell everybody I know that I love you."

"What if I mess up, Kyle?"

"Shh, Laura," he said, "don't think that way. You're not going to mess up. Believe me, it's just going to take one arrest to get your confidence back. And this might be it," he went on. "What do you say, let's get going?"

"Thanks." She kissed him, lightly. "But don't you think you need to get dressed?"

When they got to the central police station Kyle decided that just he and Laura would meet the pawnbroker. Everyone else would be in cars, ready to close in if

there were any problems.

"Go get wired," he said to her when the team had agreed the decision seemed the most logical.

"Are you going to wear a microphone, too?"

He nodded. "Just in case we get separated."

"Don't you think that's risky? I'd bet the people we're meeting will try to check you."

"They may, but they don't usually look in the place where I plan to hide the mike."

"The tape's going to hurt coming off."

He laughed. "I'll give you the pleasure of removing it. You can comfort me afterward."

"Thanks," she said, but she laughed, too.

During the drive to the warehouse where they were supposed to meet the caller, Kyle tried to reassure Laura by talking nonstop about anything and everything until he pulled in front.

Looking at the dark building, Laura felt her heart start to pound. Danger lurked in that warehouse. Belying any anxiety at all, Kyle got out of the car and, taking her hand, walked beside her toward the structure. "If anyone meets us, just take my cue," he said.

Laura nodded. "Okay."

He opened the door and stepped into the darkness.

"Stop right there," a low voice called.

Kyle froze. "Who are you?" he asked. "Where are you? Look, buddy, I don't like to deal with ghosts."

All of a sudden light flooded the building. The pawnbroker from the day before stepped in front of them. He glanced at Laura. "How's your ring, honey?"

"Fine," she answered. "Very nice."

The man turned back to Kyle. "Let's see your chest."

"For what? You like chests?"

"I don't like cops. And cops wear wires." When Kyle had pulled open his shirt the man nodded. "How about the little lady?"

"Sorry. The little lady isn't going to open her shirt for you, buddy."

"Too bad." But the man smiled and held out a briefcase he was carrying. "Okay, we deal anyhow. Look, I got something special for you."

"Oh, yeah?" Kyle pretended he wasn't convinced. "What is it you've got?"

"An Uzi."

Kyle glared at him. "My cause needs more than a single Israeli-design submachine gun."

"Could be there's more where that came from." The man shrugged. "I don't know. I gotta see."

"See who? Who's your source?"

The man laughed and shook his head. "I just run a pawnshop and buy little gee-gaws that people can't use no more. I don't got no sources."

"Sure."

"Look, man, you and your people gotta learn to be patient. This is America. We do things differently."

Kyle practically sneered. "We don't have time for patience. My people put the word out on the streets yesterday. We need guns and we need them fast. Now are you gonna produce, or are you wasting my time?"

"Tell you what, I got one gun for you. Cheap. You take it or you lose it."

"I'll take it," Kyle said. "You got it with you?"

The man flipped open his briefcase. An Uzi sat nestled inside. "You got the cash?"

"Of course." Kyle glanced at Laura. "Give the man some money, babe."

Laura had been watching the interchange uneasily. Then, as the man reached out his pudgy hand for the money, she realized what bothered her about him. He'd been part of Tony Calimara's organi-

zation, she remembered now. She'd seen his name on files—it was Vito Morgan. She stood there staring at him, the thought of dealing with anyone connected with Tony Calimara paralyzing her.

"Hey, babe?" Kyle said. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe she don't want to let loose of the purse strings," Vito joked.

"Give the man the money, babe," Kyle said again, but Laura didn't move. Finally he reached in her purse and pulled out several hundred dollar bills. "How much?"

"What'd I do to scare you, honey?" Vito asked.

"How much do you want for the gun?" Kyle asked.

"Five bills." Vito kept frowning at Laura.

Kyle peeled off the money and took the briefcase. Placing his arm around Laura's shoulders he said, "You'll have to pardon my wife. She's been kind of spooky lately. She's pregnant, and guns bother her."

"And you're looking for a ton of them?"

"Even though they bother her we don't want to raise a kid in this world. We're gonna fix it first. Look, anything else comes into the pawnshop, you call. Hear?"

"Sure thing."

Before the man could ask anything else, Kyle guided Laura out of the building and into the car. After he had started it and pulled out onto the street he sighed with relief. "We're clear," he said for the benefit of the people monitoring them. "Meet at the Federal Building. Shut down on the communications. Clear the channel." When the static from their walkie-talkie stopped, indicating that everything had been shut down, he glanced at her. "What the hell was that all about, Laura?"

"I froze," she said, at last. She was trembling so badly now that she could hardly speak.

"Yes, but the question is, why?"

"I recognized him. Vito Morgan. He's part of Tony Calimara's organization."

As though realizing what terror that knowledge had struck in her heart, Kyle covered her hand with his own. "Tony Calimara's in jail, Laura. He can't hurt you."

"I know," she answered. "Oh, God, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. I froze back there, and I could have gotten us both killed. I could have blown this whole operation."

"But you didn't."

"Only because you were there," she said. "Look, I want you to transfer me; you can't keep me now. Obviously I'm not ready."

"I think you are, Laura."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Count me out."

"I'm counting you in, and I don't want to hear any more objections," he said in no uncertain terms. When they arrived at the Federal Building, Kyle pulled into the garage and turned to her. "I have faith in you, Laura."

She sighed. "You know, I believe the philosophers are right: Love is blind."

He smiled. "Maybe, but love doesn't have a thing to do with my decision. I truly believe that it was the thought of Calimara that upset you."

"What if I see him? How would I react then?"

He covered her hand again in a gesture of support. "Don't worry, Laura. You won't see him. Like I said, Tony Calimara is in jail. And now that you've realized who Vito Morgan is, you can deal with him, too. By the way," he went on in a joking manner, the incident already forgotten, "better get your hands ready. I've got a lot of tape that needs to be removed."

Vito Morgan didn't call again that day. Or the day after. The entire team was growing impatient, but they worked the

streets as usual. They had certainly been buying and word was out on the street. Kyle had bought a case of hand grenades from a man who had approached them in a restaurant while they were eating, and the day before he had gotten a Laws rocket from a teenager. Where the kid had gotten hold of such a destructive weapon remained unanswered, but they consoled themselves with the knowledge that he didn't have any more weapons, or he would have tried to sell them, too. But what they were collecting was penny-ante in comparison to the big bust they were working on.

"I realize this is part of the job, but it's really disappointing to keep coming up empty-handed," Laura remarked as they went out the door of another musty pawnshop. "Maybe whoever stole those Uzis has taken them somewhere else to sell."

"They're here." Kyle sidestepped an overflowing garbage can. "We found another one late last night. Accidentally. As I understand it, a blue and white happened to stop a suspicious vehicle on the Kennedy Expressway and found it in the trunk."

"Same shipment?"

He nodded. "I checked the serial number."

"How'd you hear?"

"Captain Warner called this morning when you were in the shower. He also told me he heard from NYPD, and another shipment is missing from the docks."

The problem was escalating. Laura shook her head in frustration. "What can we do?"

"Keep looking. Something's bound to break soon." Kyle stopped as they passed an ice cream cart. "How about a Popsicle? We could use a break."

"Sounds good."

They stood near the curb eating and enjoying the spring day until a shadow fell across Laura's face. Looking up, she stared at the face of Morgan the pawnbro-

ker.

"Still looking for weapons?" Vito Morgan asked.

"We sure are," Kyle said. "What have you got?"

"A shipment of Uzis."

"Where?"

"Oh, no, I'm not gonna tell you where."

"How much, then?"

"One hundred grand."

"Don't worry, we've got the money," Kyle said.

"Maybe I ought to ask who *your* source is," Morgan said. "You been throwing a lot of money around."

"Didn't you know? Causes are always well funded."

Vito didn't press further. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "Same warehouse. Just the two of you."

"I can't get the money in fifteen minutes," Kyle said.

"Why not? You live close by, don't you? Thirty minutes, or no deal." With that he turned and hurried away.

Both Laura and Kyle stared after him. "This is it," Kyle said, tossing what remained of the ice cream in the trash. "Let's go. We don't have time to get wired. All we can do is contact everyone and get set up."

Earlier, they had managed to get blueprints of the inside of the warehouse and had developed a contingency plan just in case something like this happened. Phyllis and Sam were to position themselves just outside the west entrance and Stan and Jim the east side. The arrest would be made when the contacts left the building with the money, which Kyle had checked out of Evidence and kept in a nearby bus terminal locker.

They headed for the bus station. Laura stood by anxiously as Kyle opened the locker with a key and took out the briefcase carrying several hundred thousand

dollars in marked one-hundred-dollar bills. Then they went back to the car. "Check your gun," he instructed. Laura took out her weapon and clicked it off safety, tucking it in the folds of her skirt.

"Ready?" Kyle asked as they pulled in front of the warehouse with five minutes to spare.

"Ready," Laura answered as the overhead door opened, and they drove the car inside. The darkness of the warehouse was just as frightening as before. Laura's heart thudded as they got out of the car.

"Anybody here?" Kyle called.

"Hold up," the voice of Vito Morgan stopped them. "You got the money?"

Kyle held up the briefcase. "You got the goods?"

"Right here." He gestured to several wooden cases. "Send the little lady upstairs with the money."

"We'll both go upstairs with the money," Kyle said.

"Nope," Morgan insisted. "She goes alone. You get to help me load."

"What's the matter," Kyle asked, "don't you trust me?"

"Don't feel bad, man, I don't trust my own mother. I load these machine guns, and you could drive right out of here without paying me. She goes alone."

"I don't like it," Kyle said.

"Everything will work out fine." Laura took the briefcase from him. "Where to?" she called to Morgan.

"Up the steps. The banker will be waiting."

"Look, buddy," Kyle warned, "anything happens to her and you'll answer to me."

"Calm down, mister. Nothing's gonna happen to sweetie pie. She's just gonna make the payment, then you'll be the owners of several hundred Uzis."

As she went up the steps to the room at the top, she stayed on alert. She could hear Kyle and Morgan loading the guns.

In the distance she heard a siren. Vito Morgan heard it, too. Suddenly he turned and swore at Kyle. "Damn you. This is a double cross, isn't it?"

Kyle ducked as Morgan drew a gun and fired. "Laura!"

Laura had arrived at the upper room. She had been about to open the door when the gunshots echoed through the warehouse, ricocheting off the walls. At the same moment a man opened the door to the room and stepped out to see about the ruckus. Obviously it was too late to keep up the ruse. "Police," she said, dropping the briefcase and cocking her own weapon. "Freeze."

The man turned to her. "Well, hello, Laura," he said. "Fancy meeting you here."

Tony Calimara looked exactly the same as he had eight months ago: arrogant, and overbearing. "Calimara," she breathed as her heart hit the floor in terror. "What are you doing out of jail?"

He smiled. "I'm out on a technicality. Didn't you know? You people should learn to do things right."

"We didn't make any mistakes."

"The judge seemed to think so." He nodded at her weapon and at Kyle below, who was holding a gun on Morgan. "Call off the dogs."

"No," she said.

"You won't arrest me, Laura," he answered. "You couldn't even press charges against me the last time, not that I did anything to you that you didn't want."

"Crud," Kyle swore from below. "You lousy crud."

In the distance they could hear more sirens. The rest of the team burst through the doors, but Calimara stood in front of Laura, smiling. "I'm going to walk out of here, Laura, and you're going to let me."

She heard Kyle move to the steps. Apparently Phyllis had taken over for him. "Move away, Laura," he said, and she

knew he was planning to shoot. Obviously he thought she had frozen again.

She shook her head. "No. I can do this. I can manage."

"Laura, move."

Calimara smiled. "Don't want your lover killed, eh, Laura?" he said. "I must have been pretty good."

She ignored his taunt and she ignored Kyle. This was between her and Tony Calimara. "You were awful," she answered him softly, "and if nothing else I will get you for rape. I'll press charges." She had finally figured out her problem. All these months she had blamed herself for what he had done to her. She'd thought she was at fault because she was a cop and had put herself in the position of being raped. "I intend to prosecute you to the fullest, Mr. Calimara."

"It'll never stick. I'll get out."

"We'll see. In the meantime we have a weapons charge here that looks pretty ironclad. This will put you away for ten years at least. Turn around and put your hands on the wall," she said, aiming her weapon straight at his forehead. "You're under arrest."

"You won't do this, Laura."

"Watch me." She cocked the weapon. "Turn around. Spread eagle!" When he turned around, she quickly frisked him and then stepped back. "You have the right to remain silent—"

"If you give up that right," Stan broke in, walking up the steps and taking over, "whatever you say can be used against you in a court of law."

Stan's voice droned on, but Laura didn't listen. She turned around to glance at Kyle, who was smiling at her. "Good job."

She fell into his arms. "Do we have them?"

"Dead to rights."

"They didn't take the money."

"But they had the guns. I'll bet any-

thing if we check the records in that office we'll find out that Calimara owns this warehouse."

"Will it be enough?"

"Combined with the other charges—whatever he got out on—it'll be plenty. I was really proud of you."

She smiled. "Thank you, Kyle. Thank you for giving me this chance, and for being at my side."

"I'm willing to be at your side forever, Laura. You know that. All you have to say is the word."

"Come on, Laura," Stan said. The team stood around them in a circle, smiling. The police were taking Tony and Vito away in a squad car. "Make the man happy."

"Why not?" she said. "I've always wanted to get married and have a pack of kids."

Kyle laughed, grabbing her and kissing her right there, in front of everyone. "Come on, Laura," he said, "let's go take off some tape."

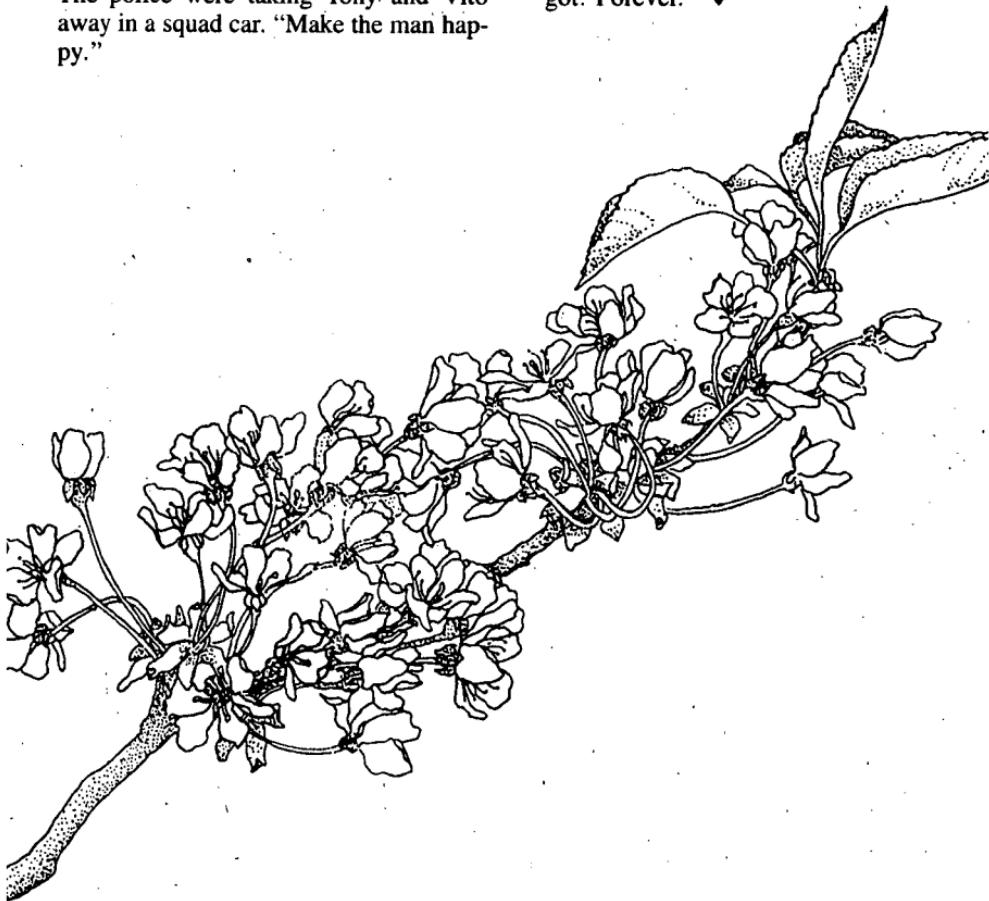
"You don't have any tape on."

"Minor detail. We'll stop and buy some." He put his arm around her.

She laughed and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Kyle Patterson, my family is going to love you."

"It's your love I'm interested in."

"And that," she said, "you've already got. Forever." ♥



A
*Warm
December*

In order to keep her sister's little girl in her custody, Dr. Merrie McGregor pretends she is engaged to moneyed, dazzling Dave Anders. But Dave has other plans for her and soon the pretense backfires—for them all.

JACQUELINE TOPAZ

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Weary from a long Saturday at the clinic, Meredith McGregor, D.V.M., was shrugging off her white coat when an angry male voice from the front office broke into her thoughts.

"What do you mean, you closed ten minutes ago? It's only five after six! And it's not my fault that I was held up in traffic. Well, I'm here, and I've come to collect my dog."

"I'll see what I can do." Alida, Merrie's assistant, appeared in the hallway of the

clinic. "Dr. McGregor? Can you release"—she checked the dog's name on a card in her hand and pronounced it sarcastically—"Champion Reeves Philton Conqueror?"

Merrie groaned inwardly. She'd been looking forward to kicking off her shoes and relaxing over a hot meal, the sooner the better. "Didn't Dr. Brown leave instructions? It must be his patient."

"Oh." Alida consulted the card. "Yes. It's okay." The phone rang. "Darn! We're

shorthanded—Jenny went home sick.” She raced out of sight around the corner.

“Miss?” The masculine voice now addressed Merrie. “I’m Dave Anders, and I’d like my dog, please. Your friend seems to be tied up on the phone.”

The handsome, well-dressed young man standing in the doorway fixed her with steely gray eyes, obviously accustomed to commanding obedience.

Without her coat, Merrie realized, he must have mistaken her for one of the technicians. “I’m sure Alida will be finished in a minute.”

“Look, I’m in a hurry. Do you mind?”

Yes, she did mind, but it would probably be easier to release Champion Reeves Philton Conqueror to his owner than to stand here arguing about it.

“All right. This way.” She led him into a room lined with steel cages, mostly empty now. From nearby came the high-pitched gabbling of Britches, a spider monkey who had accidentally slashed his hand when he grabbed his mistress’s cooking knife.

An excited bark came from a large cage at the end, and Merrie saw that it was a collie, his feathery tail fluttering with excitement.

“Hey, Buster.” Dave Anders dropped to one knee.

“Buster?” Merrie couldn’t help being amused. “You call Champion Reeves Philton Conqueror just plain Buster?”

“Would you please let him out?” the man commanded. “I haven’t got time to—”

The rattle of metal behind her made Merrie pivot just as the door to Britches’s cage swung open. Fuming silently at Jenny, who obviously had left the cage improperly latched, she rushed toward it, but fast as she was, she wasn’t quick enough. The tiny, long-armed creature slipped through the opening with a triumphant shriek and shimmied across the face of the

cages.

Dave Anders straightened up, his mouth twisting in annoyance. “I had no idea things had gotten so slipshod around here. Old Dr. Brown would never have allowed it.”

This was no time to argue. “Just step out of the room.” Merrie felt a twinge of pleasure when her authoritative tone brought a look of surprise. “Out!”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” To her dismay, he reached for the monkey. Man and monkey met, and monkey conquered by leaping onto the shoulder of Dave Anders’s expensive coat and using his arrogant head as a launchpad from which to attack a shelf full of equipment.

“Dammit! See what you’ve done?” Merrie pushed past the man and snatched up a blanket from the shelf. But as she poised to envelop the monkey with the blanket, it leaped again and scampered straight toward the door that led to the rest of the building.

Diving after him, Merrie flung the blanket over the reddish-brown form and stamped on two sides of the cloth to halt the little creature. A pair of Italian leather shoes snapped down on the other corners, and Britches was trapped.

“Thank goodness.” Only then did Merrie realize that Dave Anders was standing almost toe-to-toe with her, his face inches from hers. “You . . . Thanks . . . I . . .”

Without warning, his mouth closed over hers, and his strong hands caressed her shoulders. The touch was gentle, almost playful. Dazed, Merrie took a moment before she drew back.

“Sorry.” A lazy grin told her Dave wasn’t sorry at all. “I guess you bring out my jungle instincts.”

As if on cue, Britches hissed angrily from below and struggled against his blanket covering. “Alida!” Merrie called. The assistant came running. Donning protective gloves, she soon had the monkey

back in the cage, and Champion Reeves Philton Conqueror—alias Buster—out of his.

"I'm really sorry, Dr. McGregor," Alida said as she headed back to the front office. "I should have double-checked everything after Jenny left."

Dave, ruffling his collie's fur affectionately, studied Merrie with interest. "So you're a vet. I've never kissed a vet before."

Heat stung Merrie's cheeks. "I hope you enjoyed yourself, Mr. Anders."

"Oh, I did. And so did you." Teasing gray eyes stared into her hazel ones. "If I didn't have a commitment for tonight, I'd suggest we explore this interesting subject further."

"I think we've explored it quite far enough." She tried to regain a measure of composure. "And it so happens I also have a commitment for tonight, for which, you've made me late." She saw no reason to add that the commitment was to have dinner with her grandmother, who lived next door to her.

He straightened, snapping a leash to Buster's collar. "Perhaps we could make it another night. I'm tied up through Wednesday—"

"So am I," Merrie said, although what she planned to be busy with was wrapping gifts. "And also on Thursday night, which happens to be Christmas Eve. So—"

"Too bad. I happen to be free Christmas Eve. Sure you couldn't change things around?"

The nerve of the man! "Absolutely sure." Merrie moved decisively toward the door.

Dave followed her out. "Merry Christmas, Dr. McGregor."

"Merry Christmas."

As she changed from her rubber-soled work shoes into a pair of low-cut boots, Merrie was embarrassed to discover that her lips were still tingling. How could she

have stood there as stunned as a school-girl? Dave Anders might be handsome, but she wasn't impressed.

Well, all right, she was impressed, she admitted silently as she slipped on her fake-fur coat. And he was just the sort of man her mother would approve of: rich and good-looking. Georgia Lemoins, better known as Gigi since her third marriage two years ago, had approved of a few too many men, in her daughter's opinion.

Locking the back door of the clinic behind her, Merrie set off through the crisp winter evening to her house two blocks away. There was a poignant sadness to Nashville at this time of year, the trees bare and black against the dark sky, the air smelling faintly of old leaves and fireplaces. She hoped it would snow. Steffie deserved a special Christmas.

Her flighty sister Lizabeth, a model in New York City, had adopted the five-year old girl early this fall, having suddenly, at the age of thirty-one, decided she wanted a child.

Merrie had gone to New York for Thanksgiving and fallen in love with shy little Steffie. She'd been dismayed to learn that the child was spending most of her time with one hired nurse after another. And then, this past week, Lizabeth had announced she simply couldn't resist an invitation to go skiing in Switzerland over Christmas and visit their mother in the south of France.

So Steffie was coming to Nashville. One of Lizabeth's friends was keeping the little girl for a few days and then would fly down and drop her off Thursday en route to Florida. Merrie muttered angrily to herself, at the thought of Steffie being shuffled here and there as if she had no feelings.

It was up to Merrie, with the aid of Grandma Netta, to make sure Steffie had the best Christmas ever. She wished she could think of some way to make the holi-

day really special, some surprise that Steffie would remember happily after she went back to New York.

Anger carried Merrie rapidly home. She was due at Netta's, but first she stopped off in her own two-story brick house to feed her pets. There were three cats, Homebody, Snoozer and Wanderer, and two guinea pigs, Munchkin and Grumpus.

Merrie had coveted this house ever since she lived next door as a teenager, imagining herself moving in here someday with a husband and children of her own. Well, that part hadn't come true yet, but at least she'd been able to afford the mortgage payments when the house finally came up for sale four years ago, just after she and her partner Bill took over his father's old veterinary clinic.

After feeding everyone, Merrie rushed next door to her seventy-six-year-old grandmother. Letting herself in by the kitchen door, Merrie inhaled deeply. "Smells wonderful," she said.

"About time you got here. Emergency?" her grandmother asked.

"Not exactly." Merrie gave her a brief description of the monkey's escape. Without being asked, she set the kitchen table and helped her grandmother serve up the beef stew and gingerbread. It tasted heavenly.

"Say." Netta regarded her over a spoonful of stew. "Are you still going to that Christmas party tomorrow? The one for the kids?"

Merrie nodded. She'd promised to bring the guinea pigs to a party for a group of foster children at a recreational center. "I'll only have to be at the clinic for half an hour tomorrow. Alida will take care of the feedings."

"Well, I'm not sure I shouldn't cancel out for Christmas Eve. I ought to be here with you and Steffie."

Each year, Netta and a group of friends

sang carols at convalescent homes. "Don't be silly. You can't let your friends down. We'll see you Christmas morning."

They talked over some ideas for surprising Steffie but failed to come up with anything exciting. Finally, a comfortable silence fell between them, an easy familiarity bred of years spent in each other's company. It was with Netta that fourteen-year-old Merrie had stayed when her mother married for the second time and moved away from Nashville.

Lizabeth, then sixteen, had been eager to move to Manhattan with her mother, but Merrie had stayed right here until she finished high school. Then she'd joined her mother and sister for a year in New York, a year which had proved to Merrie that her mother's and sister's world of fast paced, socialite living just wasn't her cup of tea at all.

Merrie's thoughts inexplicably turned to Dave Anders. He obviously didn't place much value on holiday celebrations, the way he'd tried to make a date with her for Christmas Eve. He ought to be home with his family, if he had one.

Grandma Netta had lived in Nashville most of her life. Maybe she knew something about him.

"By the way," she asked, "that man who helped me with the monkey was named Dave Anders. You don't happen to know him, do you?"

Netta wasn't fooled for an instant by Merrie's pretended casualness. "Piqued your interest, did he?"

"Netta! It's just idle curiosity."

"Hah. Nothing about Dave Anders is idle. Or you either, my girl."

"So you do know him."

"Know of him, more like. Got a mind of his own, that fella, and I respect him for it. Gets his name in the paper for one cause or another all the time. His father was like that too. He's dead now and Dave's involved with the family business—com-

puters or something. The family's rich enough to turn even your mother's head, if she'd been lucky enough to meet 'em. In fact, Georgia and Sarah Anders, Dave's mother, might have known each other at school; they both went to Harpeth Hall. But Sarah—well, she's old Nashville, a real society lady. I'll bet she'd like to see that son of hers married off to some debutante at the Belle Meade Country Club."

"Well, he's got a nice dog," Merrie said and began clearing the dishes away.

Netta laughed. "Never thought I'd say it, but you could do a lot worse than Dave Anders."

The remark was so unexpected that Merrie wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. "I wasn't planning to marry the man! I just met him, and I'll probably never see him again." The words rang hollowly through her mind. That lazy grin, that commanding presence of his . . . Dave Anders wasn't going to be easy to forget, even after one encounter. "Well, I'm bushed. Thanks for a fabulous dinner, as usual, Netta."

She kissed her grandmother good night and went next door. Home to her guinea pigs and her cats..

The house felt larger than usual and a little bit lonely. Waiting for Steffie, Merrie told herself firmly. And someday for a man, too, of course. But not one like Dave Anders, who lived in the glitzy, brittle world coveted by her mother and sister.

Nevertheless, she sat for a long time staring at the winking lights of the Christmas tree she had decorated for Steffie's sake, her heart swelling with a bittersweet mixture of nostalgia and yearning.

Merrie was awakened Sunday morning by the thump of Homebody landing on her stomach. After sleepily stroking the cat and scratching her behind the ears, she arose with a yawn and got dressed. After having some coffee, she put the guinea

pigs in their traveling cages and headed for the clinic.

Alida had already finished feeding and exercising the animals. With her assistance, Merrie administered medications and checked wounds. Then she got back into her car and headed for the recreational center.

She pulled into the parking lot and unloaded Munchkin and Grumpus, who were scrabbling about in their cramped cage.

Although the party wouldn't start for another ten minutes, children were already wandering in. Merrie took the guinea pigs out and knelt on the floor to show them to the early arrivals. The youngsters squeezed around, full of delight and questions, eager to hold the furry creatures.

She was so absorbed in her task that she didn't notice the other goings-on until one of the children cried, "It's Santa!"

A well-stuffed figure in a red-and-white suit filled the doorway, his white beard jiggling as he *ho-ho-hoed*. Over his shoulder was slung a bag packed with gifts, enough to go around among the thirty or forty children who now filled the room.

"Who's been good all the time?" belied Santa.

"Me!" "I have!" answered a few children.

"And who's been good most of the time?"

"Here, Santa!" "That's me!" The room filled with eager responses.

"Well, I've got presents for all of you, then!"

As high-pitched voices shouted with glee, Merrie was struck by a wonderful idea. Suppose Santa came to call on Steffie!

What child wouldn't be thrilled by a personal visit from Saint Nick? She wouldn't mind paying the Santa; it would be worth it.

She waited until the last present had been distributed and the last cookie crumbled into a little mouth. The guinea pigs were getting cranky from all the handling, so she tucked them back into their cage, where they nestled into sleep. And then she set out to talk to Santa Claus.

He was shooing a last devoted toddler out the door as Merrie approached. "Excuse me."

"Ho ho ho!" It was impossible to tell how old he was or even what he really looked like.

"I wondered if you could help me out," Merrie asked.

"Anything, missy! Just name the time and place!"

She explained briefly about Steffie and gave the man her address. "About eight o'clock? I'd be happy to pay you."

"Not necessary!" Santa waved her away. "Ho ho ho! Happy to do it!"

Walking back to her guinea pigs, Merrie felt a twinge of uneasiness. She didn't even know the man's name, and she couldn't have identified him to save her life. Yet she'd just given him her address.

Merrie collected her guinea pigs and went out to the car. She spotted him half a parking lot away—Santa, climbing into a gray Mercedes. How odd, for Santa!

Feeling more and more uncomfortable about her impulsive behavior, Merrie started up her station wagon and automatically followed Santa's car out of the parking lot.

At the next corner, the Mercedes stopped for a red light. From behind, Merrie could see the man try to scratch his head, then pull off the tasseled cap, revealing a disordered shock of brown hair. A moment later, he stripped off the white beard as well.

The light switched to green and the Mercedes made a left turn. As it did, Merrie caught a glimpse of the man in the Santa suit.

It was Dave Anders. Before disappearing from her sight, Dave turned and waved at her, smiling.

A lot of things made sense all at once. The generous gifts, the Mercedes, the concern for good causes. Merrie was stunned. But it wasn't until she turned onto her block that it struck her.

Dave Anders was going to spend Christmas Eve with her and Steffie.

The week passed slowly. Work at the clinic was slow due to the holidays. And it didn't take long to wrap gifts for Steffie and Netta. She hoped Steffie would like the coloring pencils and the Dr. Seuss book she had gotten for her. If only it would snow . . .

And on, Thursday it did. By the time Steffie's plane landed at Nashville Airport that afternoon, thick white clouds were billowing out of the sky.

Merrie hugged herself with nervous excitement as she waited in the lounge.

Suddenly, she spotted a small red coat bobbing alongside a tall woman with a pinched-in nose and designer makeup. Lizabeth's Florida-bound friend, no doubt.

"Over here!" Merrie stepped forward.

"Well, thank goodness. I've got a connection in half an hour." The woman shook her hand free from Steffie's. "You must be Meredith? Well, here's her luggage stabs."

"Thank you for taking care of her." Merrie could see from the child's withdrawn expression that the last few days hadn't been pleasant ones. Anger surged up in Merrie at Lizabeth's carelessness. Not that Lizabeth would ever be intentionally cruel, but she was basically self-absorbed, and probably always would be.

It was with relief that Merrie watched the woman click away through the crowd. "Hi." She knelt and faced the little girl. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes. You're Aunt Merrie."

"Do you remember that I promised someday you'd get to meet my cats and my guinea pigs?"

"I remember." But there was no smile, just a solemn expression that looked out of place on one so young.

"Well, we'd better get your luggage so we can go home."

They collected the luggage and stepped out into a whitening world. "It's really coming down," Merrie observed. "Was it snowing in New York?"

"A little," Steffie said. "Do you have a Christmas tree?"

"We certainly do. And we're going to bake cookies and have a wonderful surprise tonight." Then a dismaying thought struck her. "Unless the snow's too heavy. Then, well, maybe we'll have a surprise tomorrow instead."

The possibility that Dave might not be able to make it tonight if the roads were blocked hadn't occurred to her until now. Certainly it would be unfortunate, but that didn't explain the sudden sinking of her spirits.

Merrie wasn't quite sure what she felt for Dave Anders. She knew he was entirely the wrong sort of man for her, but she couldn't deny the attraction. And didn't chemistry like that at least deserve some experimentation?

As Merrie pulled into her driveway, Grandma Netta came over to the car as they got out. "This must be my new great-granddaughter!" She gave the child a big hug. "I sure wish I could play with you this afternoon, but I'm on my way over to my friend's house. She's got a four-wheel-drive, and we'll go caroling tonight even if the snow's real bad."

"That's okay. Aunt Merrie's going to show me the cats." Unsmiling, Steffie waved good-bye to Netta and followed Merrie into the house.

Warmth rolled over them as they scurried inside and closed the door on the

swirling flakes. Merrie wondered how the house looked to her niece. Could she sense how welcome she was, how Merrie had thought all the while that someday a child would live here?

Until this moment, Merrie herself hadn't realized how often she had fantasized about nursery rhymes and picture books and *Sesame Street*. With a pang, she realized that it was likely to be some time before she had a child of her own. How was she ever going to give up Steffie after the holidays?

Gravely, Merrie introduced Steffie to the cats. The girl stared at them, half-afraid. "Do they like me?"

As if by way of an answer, they all crowded around her wanting to be petted. Steffie smiled timidly when she heard them purr. But for the rest of the afternoon, as Merrie showed her her room and fed her lunch, the little girl remained withdrawn and silent.

A little after six o'clock, Steffie lay down for a nap without protest, which gave Merrie a chance to mix up the batter for cookies. She kept the radio on, listening to reports of the accumulation. There was at least six inches of snow on the ground—more in some areas—and Nashville was pretty well shut down for Christmas Eve.

Dropping into a chair, Merrie bit the inside of her cheeks to stop the unexpected tears. It was ridiculous to feel so disappointed, whether for Steffie's sake or her own.

Suddenly there was a creak from the stairs. Steffie was in the doorway, staring around in confusion, as if she'd forgotten where she was.

"Good. You're up." Merrie quashed her own sadness, putting on a bright face for the child. "Let's make cookies."

Soon Steffie was absorbed in the process of cutting out cookies and sprinkling them with tiny colored candies. Just as

they tucked two trays into the oven, Merrie heard something very odd indeed.

Sleigh bells. And then a loud "ho ho ho" from the street.

"It's Santa!" For the first time since she'd arrived, Steffie's face lit up.

Together, they ran to the front window. Sure enough, there, outside in the snow was a sleigh pulled by two hard-breathing horses, driven by Santa and a full-size elf.

"I don't believe it," Merrie muttered to herself. "Where did he get that thing?"

"Ho ho ho!" Santa climbed down from the sleigh, carrying his bag of gifts and headed for Merrie's door.

"He's coming here!" Steffie let out a squeal.

Opening the door, Merrie smiled at the jolly figure ambling toward her, wondering if Dave could tell how glad she was to see him, in or out of his disguise.

"And is there a little girl in here?" Stamping the snow from his feet on the front mat, Santa came into the house. His elf friend had remained in the sleigh.

"Santa! Santa!" Steffie ran up to him, fearlessly grabbing at a red-covered leg.

Dave knelt on the carpet and rummaged through his bag. "Now let me see—what have I got here . . . Ah, here it is!" A bright foil-wrapped package came out of the bag. "And the name on it is—Steffie!"

"He knows my name!" Steffie clutched the package. "Aunt Merrie, he knows who I am!"

Dave sniffed the air. "Smells like somebody's baking something nice for Santa."

"The cookies!" Merrie dashed into the kitchen and retrieved them, just in time. "Why don't you invite your elf friend to come in, too?"

Santa and Steffie followed her into the kitchen. "He's got some errands to run. He'll be back."

"Aren't you going to open your present?" Merrie asked Steffie.

"Oh!" Tearing at the bright wrapper,

Steffie produced a wrinkly-faced stuffed puppy, with a tiny matching companion. "Oh, look, it's got a baby! And it's going to take good care of its baby, too. It won't ever leave it or give it away, will it, Aunt Merrie?"

"Not ever." She knelt beside the child, tears in her eyes, and gave Steffie a big hug.

Dave's frown told her he didn't understand exactly what was going on. She'd only told him that Steffie was her niece. Well, explanations would have to wait.

Steffie played with the pups, opened her other presents, and sipped at hot chocolate as the grown-ups shared coffee and cookies, and the cats dozed around them.

A warm glow enveloped Merrie, who wished this evening would go on forever. Reluctantly, she noted that Dave had been here over an hour, and wondered whether his friend would return soon.

Dave must have noticed her glancing at her watch; he got up and went to the door, peering out into the blackness. "Looks like it's started snowing again."

Joining him in the doorway, Merrie saw that the night had turned almost white. "Snowing isn't the word for it. This is a blizzard."

"Maybe Santa had better telephone his elf," Dave murmured. He jerked his head meaningfully toward Steffie, who was yawning. "Looks like somebody might need to hit the hay."

It certainly wouldn't do for Steffie to overhear Santa discussing such practicalities as how to get rescued in a snowstorm. Merrie ushered her young charge up to bed. Steffie protested weakly, but the long day had exhausted her, and she fell asleep as soon as Merrie tucked her in.

Dave hung up the telephone as Merrie came downstairs. "Kip—my elfin friend—is at his sister's house, thrilling her kids. And it looks like he's going to be stuck there for the night."

"More coffee?" Merrie felt light-headed, as though someone had spiked the cookies.

"Sure." Dave pulled off his cap and beard, and scratched his head with an expression of pure bliss. Then he came and stood in front of Merrie who was at the table pouring coffee into Dave's mug. Gazing directly into her eyes, he began humming an unfamiliar tune.

"What's that? The song, I mean." Merrie's mind felt fogged in.

"It's an old classic. 'I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa.'" His lips descended on hers.

The kiss was so unexpected that for a moment she couldn't move. Then she didn't want to move.

His mouth was firm and questing, probing hers with a gentle playfulness that inspired her to respond in kind. Merrie tasted the minty sweetness of his mouth and brushed her nose against his warm cheek.

"It was really kind of you to come tonight," she murmured. Sleepily, she leaned against him. "And you went to a lot of trouble to get that sleigh. I would have been so disappointed . . ." She hadn't meant to say that. "For Steffie's sake, I mean."

"Oh, I don't mind. As long as I'm fed well." Dave traced a finger along Merrie's cheekbone. "What do you usually eat for breakfast?"

"Breakfast?" She blinked. "Wait a minute. Just because I kissed you—"

"Merrie, my pet, it doesn't seem to have occurred to your slightly addled brain that Santa is sleeping over tonight because Santa can't get home."

Merrie could feel the blush creeping along her cheekbones. "But you can't wear that tomorrow!" She poked at Dave's pillow-swollen belly. "You'll destroy Steffie's illusions. And where will you sleep?"

Finally, it dawned on her that he could

sleep downstairs on the couch. The Santa costume could be safely stowed in a plastic trash bag, and Dave would borrow an oversize man's bathrobe that Merrie sometimes wore around the house. They would explain to Steffie that he was a friend who'd been stranded by the snow and had taken refuge here after she went to bed.

Merrie sighed as she made up the couch. "I hate fibbing, but you have to protect a child's illusions, don't you?"

Carrying a blanket from the linen closet, Dave said, "You never explained why your niece is spending Christmas with you. Where are her parents?"

"Her mother died soon after she was born. She lived with an aunt until the woman died a few months ago. And then my sister Lizabeth adopted her."

"And where is Loving Mom Lizabeth on Christmas Eve?"

"In Switzerland. Skiing."

"With her husband?"

"No husband."

"I don't mean to insult your sister, but didn't she think Steffie might need her?"

"Lizabeth doesn't think about what other people need."

Dave strolled across the room to the couch. He obviously felt quite at home as he sat down and patted the cushion beside him.

"No, thanks." Merrie hung back, wishing she didn't feel so awkward. "I'd better be getting to bed myself. If I know children, Steffie will be up early in the morning."

Dave got up and before she could object he trapped her within his arms.

"Mmm." His cheek rubbed across her hair. "You smell like Christmas."

"It's the tree."

"Merrie, you're the most unromantic woman I ever met."

"I am?" She sighed. "Do I need lessons?"

"I know an excellent teacher." Dave nibbled at the sensitive lobe of her ear. "Lesson number one: Relax. Stop fighting the messages your body is sending you. Ah. That's better."

Merrie swayed against him, her eyes half-closed. He felt so good, so sure and right . . .

Upstairs, Steffie groaned in her sleep.

Merrie jumped back. "I'd better go up and check on her."

Reluctantly, Dave released her. "That wasn't bad for your first lesson. But I can see your education has a long way to go."

"Good night." Suddenly self-conscious, Merrie hurried toward the steps, then paused. "Merry Christmas, Dave."

"Merry Christmas."

As she went up the stairs, she thought she heard him say, "Lesson number two. Never let a dangerous man into your house unless you plan to let him stay."

But she knew she couldn't have heard him correctly.

When Merrie came downstairs the next morning, a radio was playing Christmas carols softly in the background. From the kitchen came the murmur of voices.

Merrie crept closer until she could peer through the doorway.

Steffie and Dave were crouching on the floor, each manipulating a little stuffed dog. There was no mistaking the radiance of Steffie's expression.

The little girl caught sight of her aunt in the doorway. "Good morning, Aunt Merrie! Look who came in to cook our breakfast!"

Merrie looked dazedly at the pancakes Dave had already prepared and placed on the table. Wondering exactly how he had explained his presence, and particularly the bathrobe, Merrie gave the girl a hug. "Aren't we lucky?"

Within a few minutes, they were digging into the bacon, coffee and pancakes.

Steffie talked more between mouthfuls than she had in the entire time Merrie had known her. She rattled on about Dave—apparently he'd explained that he always came over to cook Merrie's breakfast on Christmas Day, and that he didn't like to put his clothes on until he'd eaten, so he simply came over in his bathrobe. To Steffie that seemed perfectly logical.

After breakfast, Steffie decided she wanted to play outside and announced she would go upstairs and get dressed all on her own.

"Did you sleep well?" Dave asked when they were alone.

"Actually, yes." Merrie couldn't remember dreaming at all. "I thought I'd be up half the night checking on Steffie."

"Having a man downstairs ought to make you feel safe," Dave corrected. "On the other hand, that could be an illusion."

"Are you saying you could be hazardous to my health?"

"In some ways." He grinned, setting aside the mug. "None that you need to worry about."

Merrie decided not to pursue the subject, so she changed to a topic that was less emotionally charged. "You're terrific with Steffie. And she bought that explanation, about your coming over here every Christmas in your robe! How ridiculous."

"Children have a logic of their own." Dave lounged back in his chair. "Did I tell you how terrific you look in pink?"

"Elizabeth gave it to me. She's a model and, well, I don't often take her advice, but she is perceptive about colors." Merrie hesitated. "I mean, thanks. I'm not very good at receiving compliments, am I?"

"You could have been a model." Dave ignored her apology as his gaze trailed slowly down her body, and Merrie was embarrassed to feel herself respond with an enhanced awareness of every soft curve.

"Well, gee, no need to inundate me with flattery." Merrie tried to dispel the mood with some light irony, but her voice caught.

"So. You could have been a model, but you chose to become a veterinarian."

"It was that or a pediatrician, and I wasn't quite up to that long a grind," she admitted. "And what about you? My grandmother mentioned that you work in your family's business. Did you ever think of *not* going into it?"

"Actually, yes. I had quite a few offers after I got my M.B.A., but my dad wanted me to come in with him, and I'm glad I did. It gave us a chance to get to know each other better, and then he died suddenly of a heart attack. If I'd gone to work somewhere else, I think I'd always have regretted it."

Merrie was impressed that Dave's priority wasn't on his achievements in building up the business, but on the opportunity it had given him to get closer to his father. But, she warned herself, men as successful as Dave didn't get there without a lot of drive and single-mindedness, not to mention long hours.

Dave started clearing the table and Merrie stood up. "I'd better go up and check on Steffie."

She left quickly, without giving Dave a chance to stop her.

Upstairs, Steffie was nowhere near ready, and it took longer than Merrie would have expected to dress her. The once-silent child now chattered a mile a minute, explaining every garment's history to Merrie and asking endless questions.

By the time they descended the stairs, Merrie half expected to see that Dave had grown a long white beard of his own.

Instead, she was startled to find him seated in front of the fireplace, fully dressed, in a heavy tweed coat, old-fashioned trousers and with a pipe clamped between his teeth. He was the very image

of Sherlock Holmes.

"You look nice," Steffie said solemnly.

"Thank you, madam," Dave replied in a British accent.

Merrie laughed. "You found that suit in the hall closet, right? My partner Bill and I dressed as Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson to amuse our clients last Halloween. Now let's go enjoy the snow, shall we?"

After putting on her coat, she swung the door open and inhaled the crisp pine-tinged fragrance of the morning. The snow was still unmarred, transforming the landscape of brick houses, bare trees, and parked cars into a gleaming fantasyland.

"The buildings are so short." Steffie stared down the street.

Dave laughed and swung the child up, drawing a snort of laughter from her. "This is Nashville, not New York. We have some skyscrapers, too, but we prefer to live in houses."

"Me, too." Steffie let out a whoop as he twirled her around. "Do that again!"

Watching the two of them whirl through the snow, Merrie felt her heart squeeze with longing. Her vague wish for a husband and family had honed itself into a sharp edge. *This* was what she wanted, this moment, this fragile sense of belonging and happiness. She wanted it to last forever, even though she knew it couldn't.

Steffie decided she wanted to build a snowman. Dave was very good at that, too, and their snowman turned out to be quite a character. A group of neighborhood children gathered around to watch and comment. Steffie jumped up and down, delighted by all the attention.

A couple of hours later, the three of them tramped inside for a cup of hot chocolate. Soon they were all settled in front of a fire—Dave's contribution.

"I like it here," the child announced. "Can I come back to visit, Aunt Merrie?"

"I certainly hope so." She exchanged glances with Dave, and then heard the

chug-clunk of an aging auto.

"Is that Grandma Netta?" Steffie bounced over to the window.

"I think so, sweetie."

Dave joined Steffie at the window. "She looks just like a grandmother ought to. And she's coming this way." He glanced down at his Sherlock Holmes costume. "I suppose she might wonder what I'm doing in this."

Merrie shrugged. She'd told Netta that Dave would be here to play Santa Claus, and she suspected her grandmother could figure out the rest.

"Merry Christmas!" Merrie gave her a hug when she walked in, her arms encircling a gaily wrapped package. "We have a—uh—guest this morning." She shot Netta a look that, Merrie hoped, conveyed they weren't to discuss the matter in front of Steffie.

"Sherlock Holmes, I presume," Netta greeted Dave without batting an eye.

"He comes here every Christmas," Steffie volunteered. "In his bathrobe."

"Does he?" Netta lifted an eyebrow. "Well, now. Do you have a kiss for me, child?"

Merrie was grateful that, during the next few minutes, everyone's attention was taken up with hugs and opening the gift—a set of Peter Rabbit books, which Steffie crowded over joyfully. But she didn't suppose for one moment that her grandmother had missed anything of what was going on, or that there wouldn't be plenty of questions later.

After some hot chocolate and a round of cookies, Netta excused herself. "Frankly, I'm bushed. See you later this evening, Merrie," she said and departed.

After she left, Merrie took Steffie upstairs for a nap. When she returned to the kitchen, Dave had collected the mugs and was straightening up the kitchen.

"You're every woman's dream," Merrie told him as she began putting away the

food.

"So I've been told," he replied promptly. "But not for my housekeeping talents."

Merrie refused to touch that one. "What are your transportation arrangements?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Actually, I suspect I may have to call a cab."

"I can give you a ride as soon as Steffie wakes up. Where do you live?"

"Actually, I left my car at Kip's, but we both live in Belle Meade," he said. "And as long as we're out, why don't we take a tour of Nashville in the snow? I'll bet it's dazzling, and Steffie would enjoy it."

"Sure." Merrie couldn't find anything else that needed picking up or putting away. She felt awkward, facing Dave without the child here to keep them occupied. "Want another cup of something hot?"

"I'd rather take up where we left off last night."

"Now, look." Merrie injected as much firmness as she could into her voice. "We've had a good time, and you're a good sport, but—" She stopped, realizing she didn't know what came next. But what? How could she tell Dave that he was wrong for her, when she wasn't sure of that herself?

"But you don't know me very well yet," he finished for her. "And I know the remedy for that. We'll just have to spend a lot of time together."

"Not right now," Merrie stalled. "Not over the holidays."

"Well, as it happens, I'll be tied up for a few days—my mother's been in Florida for a week, so we're having a late Christmas celebration this weekend."

"Aunt Merrie?" The small voice came from the top of the stairs. "I can't sleep. Can I come down?"

"Do you have your shoes on?" Relieved at the interruption, Merrie went to tend to Steffie.

It didn't take that long to get bundled up again. Soon, they were in Merrie's car, gliding down snow-covered streets. They toured Nashville for about an hour. Then they dropped Dave off at Kip's house. Dave kissed the top of Steffie's head. "Sweetie, I may not see you again before you leave, but I'll make sure to be around next time you're in Nashville."

"Okay," the child murmured, visibly tired.

Dave caught Merrie's gaze and held it briefly. "I'll be seeing you," he said quietly.

Watching him stride away, Merrie realized that she was glad. Glad he'd come to her house, glad he'd stayed overnight, and glad she'd be spending more time in his company. Even if she must be crazy to allow it.

The original plan had been for Steffie to stay through New Year's Day, so Merrie had mixed feelings when a telegram arrived telling her that Lizabeth would arrive on Tuesday, only four days after Christmas. What on earth had happened to cause this change of plans? She didn't like the sound of it, and Steffie wasn't happy to know her visit might be cut short.

On Tuesday afternoon, Merrie took off an hour early from work to drive to the airport. She'd decided it might be a good idea to greet Lizabeth alone, so they could talk freely.

As always, Lizabeth was one of the first passengers to debark, since she traveled first class. After lovingly greeting each other, the two sisters picked up Lizabeth's luggage and carried it to the parking lot.

Lizabeth's high-spirited chatter filled the car as they drove but Merrie finally brought up what was on her mind. "I take it you have some good news."

"Well, yes. Terrific news, actually." Lizabeth paused dramatically. "I'm get-

ting married!"

Fortunately, they were sitting at a red light, so Merrie didn't have to concentrate on traffic. This was the last thing she'd expected. "Anyone I know?" was all she could think to ask.

"No. But you'll be so impressed. You can't imagine how rich he is! And from old money, even though he's made plenty of his own. He's fun to be with, too, in a low-key sort of way."

"I hope he'll be a good father for Steffie." It was the first thing that popped into Merrie's mind, but then she realized how ungracious that might sound. "I mean, congratulations, Liz. You know I want you to be happy."

"I know. And I will be. He really is the right man, Merrie. I've been invited to meet his family in Boston over New Year's. Oh, I'm so nervous! Imagine, me, marrying into an old family like that! Drum—that's his name, Drummond Haymes III—was married before but it was a catastrophe! The only good thing was that they had two children, which means he doesn't want any more."

"Not even Steffie?" Merrie asked as she pulled into her driveway.

"Oh, well, he knows she's a fact. But we can discuss that later!"

It wasn't until late that evening, settled in Merrie's living room, that they had another chance to talk privately.

Steffie had greeted Lizabeth with a mixture of eagerness and uncertainty that tore at Merrie's heart. Instinctively, she felt that the child didn't know where she stood.

It was after eleven now, and an exhausted Steffie had been tucked into bed an hour ago.

"So," Merrie asked. "Have you set a date?"

"Not until after I meet his family. But soon." Lizabeth tapped her fingers on the back of the sofa. "I'm not foolish enough

to think they'll approve of me; I just hope they don't disapprove. Not that it would change Drum's mind, but it could make things unpleasant. Oh, Merrie, I'm so happy! You can't imagine how perfect he is. Well, almost."

The *almost* made Merrie's breath catch in her throat. Why did she think it had something to do with Steffie?

"You see, Drum is head of the Haymes Hotel chain. He travels a lot, checking out the hotels, seeking new locations—I suppose you know their newest hotel is almost completed right here in Nashville. Well, naturally I'd want to go with him."

"So where does Steffie fit into the picture?"

"Now, Merrie, don't get all huffy. I know you didn't think I should have adopted her in the first place, but I have; and I'm not shirking my responsibility."

Steffie isn't just a responsibility! She's a child, and she deserves your love, not your duty! But Merrie bit her lip and waited.

"So I've talked it over with Drum, and we don't feel that's any life for a child, being shuffled from one hotel to another. Besides, she'll be six next fall, which means she needs to start school, and of course we can't be dragging her out of class all the time." Lizabeth hesitated, obviously nervous about her sister's reaction, then plunged ahead. "So we're looking for a good boarding school. The best."

Merrie took a deep breath to keep from exploding. "Don't you think she's a little young for that?"

Lizabeth, who was usually refreshingly blunt, for once didn't answer directly. "Now, don't worry. I'm not going to snatch her away from you just yet. In fact, I hoped you wouldn't mind keeping her here for a few more weeks. I doubt if she'd enjoy the trip to Boston. Frankly, I'm not expecting to enjoy it myself."

"Of course she can stay here." And with

those words, an idea popped into Merrie's head. "Lizabeth, why don't you let Steffie stay with me? I mean, next year, while she's in school. I'd love to have her. And I'll bet Grandma Netta wouldn't mind baby-sitting after school, so she'd be well supervised."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that." Lizabeth's shapely mouth twisted in dismay. "Merrie, you're wonderful with children and animals, no question about it, but I want Steffie to grow up with a sense of discipline and . . . values. No offense intended, but you and I have very different lifestyles. I suppose it would be different if you were more settled—married, that sort of thing—but let's face it, this environment isn't, well . . . stable enough for Steffie."

Merrie knew her sister well enough to translate the message: *stable* meant not only settled, but also socially acceptable. A wild idea exploded in her head. "But if I were married, you'd feel differently?"

"Of course. Unless he was some hippie-type or something. But it's pointless to speculate, don't you think?"

Merrie blundered on without giving herself time to reflect. "Actually, I hadn't meant to tell you because we haven't announced it yet, but I am thinking of getting married. I mean . . . well . . . it isn't official or anything . . ."

"Merrie! You sly fox! Now, come on. Who is it? Does Grandma Netta know?"

Merrie shook her head and wondered how she was going to get herself out of this one. On the other hand, a make-believe engagement—with the man conveniently out of sight—might turn out to be useful, if she could pull it off. "Nobody does. But he loves Steffie. Of course, we probably won't actually get married right away, but you see, I am changing. Becoming more settled, you might say. So Steffie could—"

"What's his name?"

"I don't think he'd like for me to tell you. He hates gossip."

"I know!" Lizabeth's eyes glowed a deep azure. "That man Grandma Netta mentioned on the phone, the one who was here on Christmas! Dave Anders. I think Gigi went to school with his mother. Oh, she'll be delighted! I can't wait to tell her!"

"Lizabeth! I said it's a secret."

"I'm impressed," Lizabeth crowed. "He sounds like a dream. Rich—from old Nashville society—perfect. If Steffie's going to be moving in those circles, I certainly wouldn't object to her living here."

It was that last sentence that stifled the protests bubbling to Merrie's lips. "You mean you'd let her stay with me?"

"Well, I'm not promising anything yet, but I might. You know, I've been thinking—maybe Drum and I should get married here in Nashville. I don't particularly want to have a wedding on his family's turf, and I'm sure his parents wouldn't mind missing the wedding. Maybe you and your fiance could be in the wedding party. What do you think?"

Oh, what a tangled web we weave . . .
"It sounds . . . wonderful." There was nothing further Merrie could do tonight to extricate herself, she realized with a pang. What she needed was to give the matter some hard thought. "You must be exhausted after your flight."

"I am getting sleepy. Well, okay. We'll talk some more in the morning. And congratulations."

Congratulations. The word rang in Merrie's ears as she checked on Steffie—something that Liz didn't think to do—and changed into her nightgown.

What on earth had she gotten herself into? And how would Dave react if he ever got wind of this?

Unfortunately, a night of thinking things over failed to make a dent in Mer-

rie's problem. She'd told a flat-out lie, and now she was going to have to own up to it.

After Lizabeth left for Boston that afternoon, she confessed to her grandmother what she'd done. "And now I guess I've got to tell her the truth. But it's tearing me apart."

"I'm ashamed of my granddaughter." Netta bit down on the words with unaccustomed ferocity. "Put the child in boarding school, indeed! Lizabeth *deserves* to be lied to."

This was a response Merrie hadn't expected. "But I couldn't keep it up. She'll want to meet Dave—"

"Then you'll have to let him in on it." Netta pushed forward a plate of bran muffins, and Merrie took one automatically.

"You've got to be kidding. That's outrageous."

"It might appeal to his sense of humor." Netta rested her chin on the palm of her hand. "Of course, there could be complications, but I don't suppose it's anything the two of you can't handle. He does seem fond of Steffie."

Merrie spent the rest of the day and evening considering her grandmother's suggestion and agreed that Netta was right. She was going to have to level with Dave. How would he react? And if he agreed, could they really carry it off? Well, it remained to be seen.

The following morning, she dialed Dave's number at work, since his home number was unlisted. She tried to sound businesslike as she worked her way through the switchboard operator and two secretaries to Dave's fluid baritone.

He sounded surprised but pleased to hear from her. After an exchange of pleasantries, Merrie got to the point. "Could we meet somewhere and talk? Something's come up about Steffie and I need your help."

"Dinner," he said promptly. "I'll make

a reservation."

"Wait a minute," Merrie thought quickly. "I don't want to go anywhere fancy—I'm not in the mood. Do you know the Cockeyed Camel?"

There was a moment's pause. "Is he one of your patients?"

She chuckled in spite of her tension. "No. Just one of my favorite places. Can you meet me there?"

"Six o'clock? I'll be there."

Hanging up, she wondered if she should have suggested someplace more elegant, but decided she'd feel more comfortable on familiar ground.

And she was going to need all the support she could get.

The pub was crowded and noisy as always. Dave arrived just as Merrie was being seated. He swung into a chair, looking quite at home in the unpretentious environment in spite of his expensive Pierre Cardin suit.

Merrie braced herself. "Dave, I'd better get right down to it. Lizabeth—"

A waitress swooped toward the table. "Care for something to drink?"

They ordered wine and oyster sandwiches.

"I don't know how to tell you this," Merrie said when the waitress left, "but we're engaged."

Dave choked over a mouthful of wine and had to press his napkin to his mouth to stop the coughing. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's kind of hard to explain." Merrie didn't dare meet his eyes. "My sister's getting married and she wants to send her daughter to boarding school. Can you imagine? I didn't even know they took them that young . . ." With her hands clenched and her tongue occasionally tripping over her words, Merrie spilled out the whole story.

Dave didn't say anything until she was finished, and then all he murmured was,

"I see."

"We'd only have to pretend for Lizabeth, and she probably won't meet you more than once or twice," Merrie stumbled on. "I'm hoping that by the time we 'break up,' she'll be so pleased with how Steffie's doing that she won't want to change."

"On the other hand," Dave remarked, "had you considered that this Drummond Haymes III is also going to know about our engagement? And since he's opening a new hotel here in Nashville, it's possible that he and I will know some of the same people."

Merrie felt the blood drain from her face. "Oh."

The waitress arrived with their food. In spite of the tempting aromas, Merrie wasn't sure she could eat, but Dave dug into his meal with gusto. They munched silently for a while.

Finally Dave lifted his wineglass. "A toast. To our future."

Feeling dazed and off-center, Merrie clinked glasses with him and took a swallow. "You're really going to do it?"

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, but the whole thing seems so preposterous." Finally, a sliver of light shone through the murk. He'd agreed! Steffie was safe! "Thanks, Dave. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. What do we do next?"

"I expect my fiancee to accompany me on New Year's Eve." Dave spoke matter-of-factly. "Kip's giving a party. I realize we can't tell anyone our wonderful news, but it'll give us a chance to get into our roles."

That sounded reasonable to Merrie. "Grandma Netta usually goes over to an old friend's house for bridge—she won't mind if Steffie is there, too."

"Fine." Dave picked up the check before Merrie could grab it. "I'll be at your house tomorrow around nine. The party

starts at eight, but nobody gets there on time. Wear something smashing."

Before Merrie could respond, he brushed a kiss across her cheek and made his way out of the restaurant.

He was going to do it! Her crazy scheme might actually work, and no harm done.

Except—was taking her to a New Year's Eve party just an impulse, or did Dave mean to make more of this engagement than she'd intended?

As she rose to leave, an old saying popped into Merrie's head. Something about jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Well, it was too late to back out now.

Smashing. That didn't describe anything in her wardrobe. Well, she would have to go shopping.

So, on her lunch hour Thursday, Merrie went to the mall in Green Hills and prowled restlessly through the shops. Buying fancy dresses wasn't her style, but she didn't want to let Dave down.

Finally, she came across a dress that met all her requirements. It was emerald green with a modestly high neckline and old-fashioned puffed sleeves. Not the latest style, but it did possess a certain flare of its own, she decided.

Steffie was delighted to see her aunt's new dress, and both she and Netta obviously were looking forward to an evening spent in each other's company.

After Steffie and Netta left, Merrie had only a half hour to herself to finish dressing.

The doorbell rang promptly at nine. Merrie tried to descend with an air of calm deliberation, but instead scurried down the last few steps when the bell sounded again.

"Hi." She opened the door to a blast of cold air and stepped aside as Dave pressed by. "Cold out there."

"Freezing." He stood back to survey Merrie as she snapped the door shut. "That's the perfect color for you."

"Thanks." He was regarding her with a wry tenderness that made her heart turn over. "It's kind of conservative, I guess."

"You still haven't learned to take compliments, have you?" He leaned forward before she could protest and, his cold nose touching the vulnerable hollow of her throat, inhaled her scent. "You smell nice, too. What perfume is that, anyway?"

"I'm not wearing any. Look, you don't have to play the smitten lover with me when we're alone, okay? Save it for Elizabeth."

"I need the practice." He helped her with her coat and they hurried down the walk together, teeth gritted against the wind. It was a relief to settle into the gray Mercedes and feel the heat blast against her feet.

It was odd how much at home Merrie felt, riding through the night beside Dave. As if they'd known each other for much longer than a week and a half; as if they shared a lengthy past. She couldn't remember ever feeling this at ease with a man.

They arrived all too soon at Kip's low modern home. Dave halted the car in a large turnaround.

It was only a few steps to the front door, and after a moment their host admitted them to the warm interior, already filled with partygoers. There was hardly time to brace herself; meeting new people had never been Mertie's forte, and especially not in groups.

"Hey, I'm glad you made it," Kip said. "People have been asking about you. We've got plenty to eat and drink, and there'll be music for dancing." Then he was off, greeting some new arrivals.

"How about something hot to drink?" Dave offered. "I think I smell cider."

"Perfect." But they hadn't gone more

than a few steps before someone hailed Dave, and people began drifting their way.

Dave introduced her around. Suddenly Merrie, her hand on his arm, felt him stiffen briefly. She followed his gaze to a tall older woman standing in the doorway to the kitchen, her profile to them.

"I wish I'd known my mother was going to be here," Dave murmured, too low for anyone else to hear. "I would have prepared you. We'd better say hello." Dave led her forward, toward the kitchen door. "Mother?"

The woman turned.

"I'd like you to meet a special friend of mine, Merrie McGregor." Dave kept one arm protectively encircling Merrie's waist, and to her surprise she was glad of the gesture.

Sarah Anders obviously didn't miss a thing, not the way her son was holding Merrie or the word *special* in his introduction. "I'm delighted to meet you." She hesitated only a fraction of a second. "If I'm not mistaken, your mother was Georgia Hixton, wasn't she?"

"Yes. You went to school together, I believe," Merrie said impulsively.

"That's right. What's Georgia up to these days?"

"Well, she's married to a Frenchman and living on the Riviera."

"She was a year behind me, you know," Sarah observed. "A lovely girl. You've inherited some of her looks, my dear."

"Not as much as my sister," Merrie said, and then added, "I mean, thank you."

"Merrie has a hard time accepting compliments," Dave said.

Sarah Anders smiled. "So nice to meet you. Dave, we'll be expecting you for brunch tomorrow."

"Yes, Mother." Sarah drifted into the kitchen.

"She's . . . a real lady." Merrie was in-

timidated. Sarah Anders made her feel completely inadequate, as if she'd blundered into the wrong party and everyone was trying to make the best of it. Yet Dave's mother had behaved with perfectly good manners.

Other acquaintances closed in around them, and Merrie spent most of the rest of the evening listening to conversations about people and events that meant nothing to her.

A couple of hours later, Dave quietly suggested that they should go welcome the New Year in at his place. Merrie thought this might be too dangerous but she was tired of crowds, so she accepted.

Silently, they drove the short distance to Dave's house, which turned out to be a great neo-classical structure modelled after Tara in *Gone with the Wind*. The interior was equally forbidding.

So this was how Dave intended to live, in a manor, so to speak. What sort of woman would live here with him? Merrie wondered. An old friend his mother would approve of? Or someone like Elizabeth, who hadn't been born to wealth but would relish presiding over such formal surroundings?

Definitely not someone like Merrie, who preferred a touch of chaos and a house where children and animals could romp freely.

In the huge formal kitchen, Dave made coffee, then paced over to the cupboard and pulled out a box of doughnuts. "Let's pig out."

Tension bubbled away from Merrie and she giggled at the image of Dave, dressed in an elegant suit, licking doughnut glaze from his fingers.

"Doughnuts and coffee. It's sheer heaven," she exclaimed.

Instead of replying, Dave leaned toward Merrie and closed his mouth over hers.

Merrie wanted to move away, but she

couldn't. The flick of his tongue, and the gentle grip of his hands on her shoulders carried her out of herself, into a realm of pleasurable yielding. An answering need welled up in her, and she responded with a passion that was new to her.

How sturdy and firm Dave felt in her arms. She could lean on him and lose herself in him, and never look back . . .

Had she gone mad?

There was no such thing as losing yourself in another person. The morning would come, bringing its clear revealing light, and you had to get up and deal with your own life again.

She needed a man, yes. A man very much like Dave. She wished it could be him, but it couldn't. His world was one she had rejected long ago.

Dave was obviously aware of her change in mood. "What's wrong, Merrie?"

"Everything." She tried to find the right words and failed. "Dave, I can't explain myself. You could argue with me and you'd be right, but we can't go on seeing each other."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard."

"Dave, I can't handle this relationship right now, and I'm sorry if that sounds adolescent. I'll understand if you don't want to continue with the mock engagement—"

"And let your sister stick Steffie in some damn boarding school?" He scowled. "Look, we need to talk about this when we're both feeling more rational. I'm tied up tomorrow during the day, but I want us to have dinner. Alone."

"No. Dave, please. Can we just do this my way? When I need you to help persuade Lizabeth, I'll give you a call. Okay?"

"I make no promises about keeping away from you." Reluctantly, he put on his coat, then got hers and followed her

out of the kitchen. "As it happens, I've let a lot of work slide over the holidays, and I've got to make some trips out of town over the next few weeks. But then—"

"We'll deal with 'then' when it comes." Somewhere a firecracker sounded, followed by the tootling of paper horns, and shouts echoed faintly from a neighboring house. "Happy New Year, Dave." Merrie didn't dare look into his eyes.

"Yes, it will be—happier than you think."

She couldn't decide whether his words sounded more like a threat or a promise, but they both were quiet on the ride home.

Dave took Merrie at her word and didn't contact her during the next two weeks. That was what she'd asked for, but the reality of not seeing him was much more painful than she'd expected.

One evening, when she arrived home from work, Lizabeth called and announced that she and Drum would be in Nashville the next day. Drum had to inspect the hotel, and she wanted to see Steffie. "And maybe we can meet your fiance," she told Merrie brightly.

Merrie's heart sank. There was no avoiding it, she had to get in touch with Dave. But when she called him at work, his secretary told her that Dave was out of town. She left an urgent message for him to call her as soon as he got in.

The next afternoon, Merrie drove with Steffie to the airport to pick up her sister and Drum. Lizabeth was glad to see Steffie, but after the first embrace, both she and Drum ignored the little girl.

"I left a message for Dave but he's still out of town," Merrie said as they reached Drum's hotel where he and Lizabeth would be staying.

"I'm looking forward to meeting this fiance of yours," Drum said as he helped Lizabeth out of the car. "I hear he's in business."

Merrie opened her mouth to explain, but just then a staff member showed up, showering effusions over Drum and Lizabeth.

After their luggage was dropped off, everybody climbed back into Merrie's car.

Merrie found herself chattering too much as she drove. It was important for Steffie's sake to make a good impression on Drum, but Merrie had a feeling that her modest, well-lived-in home wasn't likely to accomplish that.

In an effort to please Drum, she had prepared lunch for her guests. But as soon as they arrived at her house, and while Steffie was showing them around, she tasted her soup and realized that it was flat.

The sound of the doorbell was a welcome relief. Wiping her hands on a kitchen towel, Merrie headed for the front door. It was Dave.

"You're back!" Merrie was so happy to see him, she nearly kissed him but restrained herself. Steffie threw her arms around his neck. "Come meet my mommie," she cried.

Merrie introduced Dave to her sister and Drum.

"I came to take everyone out to lunch," Dave announced after Merrie whispered to him about her soup. Grandma Netta arrived just in time to babysit, and the adults took off in Dave's Mercedes.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take you to one of my favorite restaurants." Dave pulled smoothly away from the curb. "It's in, the Opryland Hotel."

"Perfect." Drum nodded appreciatively. "That's one of the places I wanted to see while I'm here."

Merrie sank back in her seat as the two men discussed business. She noted with relief that Drum seemed to appreciate Dave's business acumen and Lizabeth was duly impressed with Dave's

Mercedes. So far so good, she thought.

Once they arrived, Merrie sensed Drum taking mental notes as they entered the huge, glass-domed interior courtyard known as the Conservatory.

"Here we are." Dave escorted them along a walkway to Rhett's, a cafe with tables set "outside," in the Conservatory. A waiter pulled out chairs for Lizabeth and Merrie, and she was pleased to see Drum's look of approval as he took in the napkins formally fanned above the wine-glasses, and the fountain tinkling softly to the side.

"Very nice. The most successful hotels never forget the importance of atmosphere."

After the waiter took their orders, Drum began asking about Dave's business. As the men talked, Merrie breathed a silent prayer. *Please let him be so fascinated that he agrees to leave Steffie with me.*

The guests all around them were well dressed, and Lizabeth was clearly looking them over.

"Do you know, I've never felt comfortable in hats, but that lady over there looks splendid in one." Lizabeth gestured across the room. "Isn't she grand? Like Queen Elizabeth."

Merrie followed her gaze to a group of older women dining regally in one corner. The lady in question was turned away, listening to one of her companions.

Then the woman turned in profile, and Merrie had to stifle a gasp. With her foot, she nudged Dave lightly.

She didn't dare look at him, but she felt him turn, and he broke off in mid-sentence.

"Someone you know?" Drum asked as the older woman glanced their way.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. It's my mother." Dave stood up as he caught Sarah Anders's eye. Merrie watched Dave's mother excuse herself and start in their direction.

Maybe it would be all right, she told

herself nervously. A few introductions, a bit of chitchat . . .

Her sister's first words to Sarah Anders were, "How delightful to meet you. I'm so glad your son is marrying into our family!"

"I beg your pardon?" Sarah's well-bred expression gave way to open astonishment.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Merrie's sister, Lizabeth."

"Pleased to meet you." Sarah Anders was clearly operating on automatic pilot, a lifetime pattern of correct behavior carrying her through the confusion.

Merrie didn't dare look at Dave as he completed the introductions. She'd gotten him into this mess; she only hoped his mother would understand when he explained.

"Won't you join us?" Dave offered his chair.

"I'm afraid my friends would take it amiss." There was no avoiding Sarah's direct gaze as she turned to Merrie. "My dear, I'm so happy for you. If you haven't already made plans, I'd like to give the engagement party. Valentine's Day would be an appropriate occasion, I should think. Dave wouldn't mind if we used his house for the occasion, would you, dear?"

Please, let Nashville disappear beneath a volcanic eruption. Anything, anything to get me out of this.

Instead, piling shock upon shock, Dave was saying calmly, "What a generous offer, Mother. I wouldn't mind at all. Drum, Lizabeth, consider yourselves the first to be invited."

It wasn't until Sarah's figure had retreated out of earshot that Lizabeth demanded, "You mean she didn't know?"

"How could she?" Merrie snapped. "It was supposed to be a secret, remember?"

"Oh, that's right! How stupid of me! Merrie, Dave, do forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive. She had to find out sometime." Dave's pronouncement was startling, but before Merrie could check to see if he'd taken complete leave of his senses, the waiter arrived with their food.

For the rest of the afternoon, as Dave took everyone on a tour of his house, Merrie puzzled over his behavior. He seemed to delight in playing the affable host, showing Drum and Lizabeth around his house—and plying them with drinks and amusing stories.

Not until Drum and her sister had been dropped off at their hotel did Merrie have a chance to speak to Dave alone.

Staring out the window of the Mercedes, she took a deep breath and plunged in. "Dave, why did you let your mother do it? Can you imagine how humiliated she'll be when she has to cancel the party? She's probably invited all her friends by now!"

"I have no intention of canceling it."

"Have you completely flipped out?"

"Let's not forget what's at stake here. How would it look to Lizabeth if we refused to have an engagement party? You wanted to fool her, and you have."

"But what about your mother? I didn't intend to fool *her*!"

"My mother loves children. She'd understand." That wasn't an answer and surely he knew it, but just then they arrived at Merrie's house, and Steffie came running toward them with Netta trailing behind.

After hugging Steffie and greeting Netta, Dave made his farewells.

Once inside, Merrie fed Steffie and tucked her into bed. Then she went downstairs to tell Netta what had happened.

"What do you think?" she asked when she'd finished. "We can't go through with it, can we?"

"It looks like Dave intends to."

"But, Netta, by the time we get around

to 'breaking the engagement,' we'll have told so many lies I won't remember which is which!"

"Dave may not be sure he wants to break it off."

"What?"

"I think he's smitten with you," Netta continued. "Mind you, I'm not suggesting he's trying to trick you into anything. But perhaps the thought has crossed his mind that in time the two of you might seriously want to consider getting married."

Merrie shook her head. "I can't imagine it. Netta, if you'd seen his house—I could never live there. It would be like moving into the Taj Mahal!"

"If that's your only objection, things might not be as hopeless as they seem." Without giving her a chance to protest, Netta stood up. "It's been a long day. Now go get some rest."

"I'll try." But Merrie lay awake late that night, trying to sort out her tangled thoughts.

She would simply have to insist that Dave tell his mother the truth, immediately. There was no other possible course, Merrie decided at last, and finally drifted into sleep.

The next day Lizabeth announced that she was taking Steffie back to New York with her on Monday. Steffie was heartbroken, but her mother promised to bring her back in a month for Aunt Merrie's and Dave's engagement party.

"And then, we may even let you stay here for a while," Drum said smiling. Merrie's heart missed a beat.

On Monday, she drove the little family to the airport and returned home determined to deal with Dave. But once again, Dave had disappeared on a business trip and her requests for him to call her as soon as possible remained unanswered.

Everyday, however, a beautiful bunch of roses arrived at the clinic.

On Friday, an announcement of the engagement appeared in the newspaper. And a written message, obviously hand-delivered since it bore no postmark, was waiting at Merrie's house that evening. It said: "Don't worry about the guest list. We called Netta today and it's all taken care of." There was no signature.

Merrie stormed next door, where a perplexed Netta said she'd given a list of names and addresses to Dave's secretary, who'd assured her Merrie was aware of the arrangements. "This has to stop," Merrie told Netta. "I don't like the feeling I'm being railroaded."

Finally, on Saturday morning, after leaving countless messages on Dave's answering machine, the doorbell rang. It was Dave.

"Got your message," he said when she opened the door. "Something bothering you?"

"You're outrageous, infuriating, arrogant, and irresponsible." Merrie glared at him.

"I object to 'irresponsible.'" He moved past her without waiting for an invitation.

"I thought we had an agreement." Merrie stalked into the living room, where Dave had draped himself over the sofa. "This engagement was a hoax to fool my sister. I made it quite plain I wasn't interested in getting involved in a relationship. You agreed to let me handle things my way."

"First of all, Merrie, I think you should sit down." He accompanied his words with an unexpected tug at her hand which landed her at his side. "Second, the chemistry between us is powerful enough to make Madame Curie take note. Resistance is useless, Merrie. Nature has to take its course."

"You're so full of hot air I'm surprised you don't float." Several more sharp retorts started up to her lips but never made their way out, because Dave's mouth was

blocking their exit.

As his kiss breathed fire into her veins and his hands worked a slow, irresistible magic on her shoulders and back, the rebellious thought surfaced that maybe Dave was right.

He felt so right in her arms, in her house, and her heart. He was right about the chemistry, too, was the last rational thought she had all evening.

Her body took over, freed at last from the chains of Merrie's intellect. It knew that skin belonged against skin, that his hands would free them both to lie unabashedly side by side, with no clothing to interrupt the flow of electricity that sizzled between them.

She burned beneath his touch, aching to enter realms that had never beckoned to her before. Only Dave could take her there . . . only Dave . . .

They joined as rivulets of fire, sparking against a midnight sky. Time stretched and folded upon itself, and sensation had no beginning, no end, nor any limit.

When the fire muted into embers, Merrie lay quietly in Dave's arms, her eyes closed against the intrusion of the ordinary.

"As I was saying," Dave murmured against her ear, "it's best to let nature take its course."

Merrie's lips on his were the only answer either of them required.

Most of Merrie's time throughout the next few weeks was absorbed by planning the party—one of the highlights of the social season, a newspaper article had called it—but the highlights of *her* social season were the precious, rare evenings when she and Dave could relax together, making love, sipping hot chocolate in front of Merrie's fireplace, sharing private jokes.

Finally, the day came when Merrie stood to one side of Dave's vast living room, half hidden by a streamer of red and

white Valentine's Day balloons that sagged from its upper mooring. Sunday afternoon sunlight flooded through the great front windows.

The large rooms were crowded with gaily dressed Nashvileans.

"*Ma cherie*, everything is *tres charmant, n'est-ce pas?*" Gigi, who had arrived the night before, appeared at Merrie's elbow. "What a brilliant marriage! Even your sister is impressed!"

"Everybody, but *everybody* is here!" Lizabeth exclaimed. "Even the mayor! Drum's made some terrific contacts."

Lizabeth, Drum and Steffie had checked into their hotel late last night, and Steffie was there now with a babysitter since Lizabeth didn't feel she ought to be attending the party. Merrie wished the little girl were there. She felt out of place and alone in this huge crowd. This whole affair was proving too much for her. Oh, heavens, how did she ever let things get so out of hand?

She needed Dave, needed his strength and warmth right now to assuage the pangs of guilt, to make her feel as if this whole charade was perfectly all right.

There he was, heading toward her, and Merrie's heart swelled with joy as he reached her side. "Everyone surviving?" he teased as his arm encircled her waist. "Come on. Kip's ready to propose a toast."

Can't we skip this part? Merrie tried to signal Dave by squeezing his hand, but he was already leading her toward the main refreshment table, where Kip waited with a glass at the ready. Sarah Anders stayed behind, her expression unreadable, as Gigi chattered about some teacher they'd known in high school.

Kip tapped a spoon against his glass for silence. "I'd like to propose a toast. To the best friend a man could ever hope for, Dave Anders, and his beautiful bride-to-be, Merrie McGregor."

"Dave and Merrie!" The names were almost indistinguishable in the many-throated mumble.

Then Dave stepped to Kip's side. "I'd like to present my future wife with a small token of my esteem," he said. As Merrie watched in disbelief, Kip produced a jewelry box and Dave opened it to reveal a ring that sparkled and caught the light. An appreciative buzz rose from the crowd.

I can't accept this. The words caught in her throat. Why had Dave gone to such lengths?

An unexpected surge of anger boiled through Merrie, heating her cheeks and rendering her momentarily speechless. He'd tricked her. Did he really think she could be manipulated into marrying him? Spending their lives together was an issue that needed to be carefully considered, not something he could thrust on her hightidedly.

But Steffie's happiness lay in Merrie's hands. Furious as she was with Dave's arrogance, there was no point in blowing off steam right now. After all, he couldn't force her to marry him.

"How lovely." She hoped the others would attribute her choked voice to tender emotion. "I—I wasn't expecting this."

"This is a very special ring." Sarah Anders materialized at Merrie's side. "The diamonds come from an heirloom necklace that belonged to my grandmother. Dave had the setting specially designed."

How could he have done this? Merrie didn't trust herself to say anything, so she pretended to be absorbed in examining the ring as Dave slipped it on her finger.

Fortunately, Lizabeth and Drum provided a welcome distraction as they made their way toward her through the crowd.

Sarah Anders was speaking again. "We have one more happy announcement to make today. For those of you who haven't met them, this is Merrie's sister Lizabeth and her fiance, Drummond Haymes III."

Lizabeth reached them and swung around to face the guests. "I hope my sister doesn't mind sharing just a tiny bit of her spotlight. You see, Drum and I have decided to get married in two weeks, at the new Haymes Hotel-Nashville, and we'd like everyone here to be our guests. Merrie of course will be my maid of honor, and Dave will be our best man."

A round of applause greeted the news. Merrie gave her sister a hug, her spirits finally lifting as she realized what this might mean.

Once Lizabeth and Drum were married, they'd be going on their honeymoon. And then they'd be absorbed in each other. Which meant they'd probably want to get Steffie settled as soon as possible. And after today, there was little doubt the child would be entrusted to Merrie.

At least some good would come of all this deception.

Later, in the powder room, Lizabeth confirmed Merrie's thoughts. Steffie was indeed to stay in Nashville with Merrie indefinitely.

The rest of the party passed in a blur. Merrie's anger at Dave continued to burn despite her happiness over Steffie, and it took all her energy to appear cheerful as guests paused to congratulate her and exclaim over the ring. It seemed like hours before everyone left and Dave drove her to her house. Finally, she could confront him. "I feel rotten, deceiving your mother this way!" she exclaimed. "And that stunt with the ring was unforgivable. You actually had your great-grandmother's diamonds reset?"

"They look nice, don't you think? It was my mother's idea. She likes you, you know. She really wants you to be my bride."

"Aren't you forgetting something? This whole thing is a fake! We aren't really getting married . . ."

"Why 'not'?" Dave planted himself

squarely in front of her. "We're happy together, aren't we? At least, that's the impression you gave me . . ."

Merrie couldn't disguise her anguish. "Dave, we're wrong for each other. That party today—I can't live like that. That's not my world."

"Give it a chance." He brushed aside her objections impatiently. "Merrie, you don't give yourself enough credit. You can manage your career and be the perfect hostess at the same time; you were stunning today. My friends kept congratulating me on finding such a beauty."

"I don't want—"

"Let me finish." Infuriatingly, he didn't seem to notice that he wasn't letting *her* finish a sentence. "We belong together, and you know it. If you can honestly say that you could never love me, then I'll walk right out of here forever."

"Dave, I don't know—"

"Well, I do. And I don't believe in wasting time."

"Dammit, I'm not one of your employees, and I'm not a subsidiary to be bought and sold, either!" Merrie flashed out.

For the first time Dave didn't have an immediate answer. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Finally, he said in a milder tone, "I love you, Merrie."

"Do you?" She had to fight back the tears. "Or do you just love the woman you think I could be? The beautiful hostess, or whatever it is you want."

"What I want, Merrie, is the woman you really are."

"And who is that?"

"You don't realize your own potential, Merrie." His voice was languid with contentment, or was that smugness? "You have so many talents, so much to offer."

"My guinea pigs like me the way I am."

"So do I. But I also like what's inside there, what you've been afraid to let out. You hide out as if you didn't deserve better. Look at the way you decorate, with

odds and ends that don't even match. And half the time you forget to wear makeup, not that you don't look terrific anyway, but you look even better with it. You need to seek out new friends, people who might challenge you, to socialize more."

Inside Merrie, anger battled with pain. "Forget it, Dave. This is the way I am, and if you can't take me, you're going to have to leave me."

Fury darkened Dave's face. "You *are* stubborn as a mule, Merrie."

"Maybe so. I just know I'm not a hostess, and I'm not a raving beauty. I spent a year in New York wearing makeup and 'fulfilling my potential,' and it's for the birds." A tear broke loose, wending its way across her cheek to one ear. "You've got so many of the qualities I'm looking for, Dave. So many things that I love. But you can't accept me as I am."

"Do you realize how adolescent that sounds?"

"You arrogant—" She broke off, not wanting to say things she would regret. "Dave, I think you'd better go."

He hesitated, then nodded. "We'll talk this out when you're calmer." He paused in the doorway, his face a mask of frustration. They stared at each other, anguished, and then he walked to the door. Merrie stood where she was, her chest swelling with the ache of needing him, until the front door closed behind him.

She blinked and let the tears cascade down. Darn it, she had a right to cry. She realized she loved Dave deeply. And it was a love that had no hope, no future.

Whenever Merrie saw Dave those next two weeks during the wedding preparations, the two of them greeted each other with a touch of constraint. But where she felt tense and awkward, Dave appeared unfazed by their falling out.

He thinks I'm going to come around. The realization angered her, tempering

her anguish—but only a little.

Still, Merrie couldn't dispel the memory of the joy she'd known in his arms. Wasn't there some way they could work it out?

Only if he were willing to meet her half-way. And so far he hadn't even acknowledged that he needed to compromise.

Merrie's sole consolation was that soon, very soon, Steffie would be coming to live with her. The knowledge warmed and comforted her.

Finally, the day of the wedding arrived. Merrie and Gigi helped Lizabeth get ready in the lavish hotel suite that had been rented for the occasion. The bride looked magnificent in her elegant lace dress, her face radiant with love.

As the organist started playing the wedding march, Merrie glided down the aisle of the hotel banquet room, preceded by a high-spirited Steffie who was throwing petals around, taking her role as a flower girl very seriously. Dave was waiting for Merrie at the end of the aisle, smiling with proud appreciation.

It was all Merrie could do not to walk right to his side and link her arm through his. Dammit, they *did* belong together—the real Merrie and the real Dave—not some pair of society bookends. She wanted to snuggle up with him in a rumpled bed in a comfortable house full of animals and kids. And she wanted to lead a life full of quirks and playfulness, love and snowmen and Santa Claus suits.

Somehow Merrie steered herself into her assigned place beside Steffie and turned to watch her sister and Drum sail joyously down the aisle.

It seemed to Merrie that she had never before truly understood the full significance of marriage, the almost supernatural bond that was woven with the exchange of vows and hearts for a lifetime. In a daze, she heard the words of the ceremony, watched the ring being slipped onto

Lizabeth's finger and saw Drum lean forward for his kiss.

Then Lizabeth and Drum were gone, an enchanted pair vanishing up the aisle, as Dave extended his arm for Merrie and they followed, with Steffie close behind.

Merrie blinked away tears she hadn't even known were there. Dave halted outside the ballroom, as if to speak with her, but they were instantly engulfed by well-wishers.

It was a couple of exhausting hours later, when the reception was nearly over, that Sarah Anders came up to Merrie and put her arm around her shoulders affectionately.

"Dave asked me to tell you that he'll be downstairs in the racquetball court, if you'd like to join him. Why don't you, dear?"

Merrie hesitated, not knowing what to say.

"I have sensed that something has not been right between you and Dave these last two weeks," Sarah continued, "and I just want to say this: I know Dave can be difficult to be with sometimes. But you two belong together. My dear, don't do anything rash that you'll regret later." And with that, she was gone.

Merrie blinked back tears. Dammit, she loved Dave and he loved her. Why should his stiff-necked arrogance stand in their way? She would try to talk to him one more time.

With that thought in mind, Merrie swept upstairs to change into more casual clothes.

Soon after Merrie padded down the stairs and opened the door to the court. "Hi. Your mother said I'd find you here."

Dave turned and smiled. "I was hoping you'd join me. I'll take a handicap, if you want to play."

"Dave, I really came down here to talk. I've been thinking about things. I'm will-

ing to marry you, but only on my terms."

"And they are?"

He was standing a few feet away, but Merrie felt engulfed by him. It took all her determination to stand her ground. "First of all, we live in *my* house." Seeing that he was about to object, she hurried on. "And the only parties we'll give are the potluck, come-as-you-are kind."

Dave chuckled. "Is this a joke?"

"Oh, no. I'm perfectly serious."

All trace of amusement vanished from his face as he drew near and caught Merrie's shoulders, anger darkening his gray eyes. "This is ridiculous."

"You think so? What about what you want me to do? Give up my house, move into that hotel you call a home, and mince around playing hostess?"

"Oh, so that's what you were getting at." Dave shook his head. "Merrie, this is all so unimportant. We'll work it out after we get married."

"We'll work it out first or we're not getting married. Are you willing to give up your lifestyle and come live my way?" Merrie demanded.

"That's excessive." A note of irritation underlay Dave's obvious attempt to sound patient and reasonable.

"It's equally excessive to expect me to give up my lifestyle and come live your way," she snapped. "It shows a selfish attitude and a lack of respect for me as a person."

To her surprise, Dave threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, Merrie, you really put me in my place! I do have a pompous side, don't I?"

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Merrie felt her wrath begin to melt into the glimmerings of mirth as Dave caught her in his arms and pinned her against the wall. He smelled rich and earthy after his workout and Merrie found herself responding to his embrace with a sudden surge of longing. Her mouth opened before his silent

demand, and her arms claimed him even as he drew her close.

"My God, I love you, woman." His voice was rough with passion. "I'd live with you in a cave if that's what you wanted."

"No, thanks," she murmured. "It wouldn't be comfortable for Steffie. And speaking of Steffie, I better be going. She and Grandma Netta are waiting for me to take them home."

As they returned to the reception area, Merrie felt aglow with happiness. Was it possible that Dave really had agreed to meet her halfway? She supposed it would take days or weeks to get used to the idea. But she was in no hurry; joy was something to be savored, not rushed.

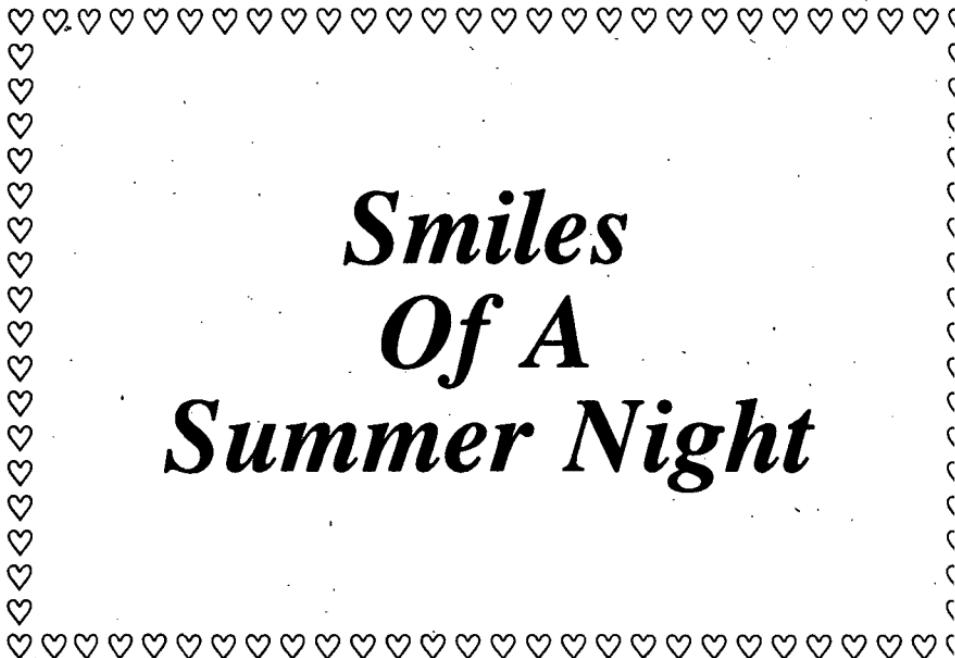
"Dave?" she asked hesitantly. "Is it going to make problems for you? Not being able to entertain formally, I mean?"

"Feeling guilty?" he teased, then sobered as he saw that her concern was genuine. "Merrie, I can always rent a hotel ballroom, or a room in a restaurant. I won't pretend I don't like a touch of glamour now and then. But what's really important will be the home we make together, where we can kick our shoes off and be ourselves. Now, I think we should celebrate the start of our *real* engagement with a formal dinner tonight."

Merrie hesitated. "I was going to eat with Steffie and Netta."

"Great. I suggest we have a pizza and antipasto salad catered in your living room, by candlelight. Enough to feed three grown-ups, one five-year-old, and—how many cats and guinea pigs?"

"As many as we can squeeze in," Merrie said happily and pulled him forward as she skipped down the hotel corridor eager to meet the future. ♥



Smiles Of A Summer Night

April Jasper has had it with love, until she meets her new employer, dashing Jules Robichaux. Like a modern Rhett Butler, he sweeps her away with his charm.

— DELANEY DEVERS —

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Different. You wanted different. April Jasper's brooding gaze shifted from the sluggish brown of south Louisiana's Bayou Lafourche to the gnarled oaks dripping lacy streamers of Spanish moss. Beyond the air-conditioned comfort of the plush chauffeured limousine was the tropical green of a warm March day. A day incredibly different from the one begun in New York City with an icy wind whipping skirts and scudding trash along the sidewalks.

Different. She needed that. New scenery, new faces, a new life—all because of a man. A man who had sworn to love and honor—only he hadn't sworn eternal fidelity. She had forgiven him once, twice, three times in the short space of a year, then accepted the fact that her husband was incapable of being faithful.

Her divorce had coincided with her final disillusionment with the teaching profession. She had never wanted to be anything other than a teacher. Not a policewo-

man patrolling the halls. Not a bouncer trying to eject disruptive pupils from her class. And certainly not a victim of her own students! Having her purse stolen twice was bad enough; being threatened by a deadly serious teenage girl with a switchblade was the end of her desire to teach in public schools.

In revulsion against her failed marriage and unhappy professional life, she'd decided she needed a complete change.

A flicker of amusement banished the shadows from April's mind. In these hectic weeks of subletting her apartment and burning her bridges, she had often stopped to smile and shake her head and think: *a nanny!*

It sounded Victorian, but it wasn't. Prudence, Inc., an employment agency that catered to the stratospherically wealthy, had a lengthy list of clients begging for qualified help. After two days of interviews by fur-muffled mothers, silk-suited fathers, and unctuous lawyers, April had found Arsene Arceneaux, the dapper Robichaux family attorney, a refreshing change. Combining courtly southern charm with a warmth notably lacking in her previous interviewers, he'd brought an entrancing whiff of moonlight and magnolias into the sterile employment office. And the appeal that a genteel setting held for her battered and bruised heart was taking her to the one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Greek Revival mansion, Sans Larmes, and two orphaned children.

She had been given a sketchy outline of the family. A paternal uncle, Jules Robichaux, had recently returned from three years of working in the Middle East. A maternal aunt, Victoria Marshall, had raised the children during the two years since their parents' death in an airplane crash. The girl, four years old now, had not been with them on that trip. The boy had, but had survived—barely. He was a difficult nine-year-old whose disability

had kept him out of public schools for the past two years and whose attitude had tried the patience of former nannies and tutors alike, she had been warned. The warning merely steeled April's determination. She had worked with and won over difficult children; they held no alarm for her. Sans Larmes was made to order. A place where she would be needed.

The limo turned into an oyster-shell drive winding across a broad lawn shaded by moss-draped oaks, waxy-leaved magnolias, and sycamores with peeling grayish-white trunks. Beds of nodding roses were sprinkled over the sunniest spots. Umbrellas of wisteria dripped clusters of lavender blossoms from cool screens of fernlike foliage. At any moment April expected to see a crinolined southern belle with a broad-brimmed straw hat stroll into sight.

She blinked rapidly. Either she had a remarkably vivid imagination or . . . or . . .

She moved closer to the window, her eyes wide in disbelief. Strolling through the gloomy shade between stalactites of lacy moss was a couple who had stepped straight from the pages of history. The woman's hooped skirt swayed gently with every graceful step. One gloved hand curved about the stem of a ruffled parasol, while her flirtatious gaze was fixed on the man beside her.

He was dressed in yesteryear's version of tie and tails. The stark black of his coat and trousers contrasted with the white gleam of vest, shirt, and cravat. He had a riveting face. Roughly etched, alluring and implacable, it was marked by hawklike features, a cynical smile, and a restless black wave falling like polished ebony across his brow.

The limousine rounded a curve, bringing April abreast of the couple. The man looked up. Brilliant molten-gold eyes, shadowed by the same world-weary cyni-

cism betrayed by the quirk of his lips, dipped into her widening gaze, cutting her breath like the blade of a knife.

His expression changed with dazzling abruptness. One perfectly arched brow climbed his forehead, carrying with it the corner of his mouth. Amusement sparkled in his eyes, compelling April's responsive smile. It was as if he had touched her with the intimate whisper: *Ridiculous, isn't it?*

As the car swept around a curve lined with swaying yellow irises, April saw that the emerald lawn was crowded with guests, who were decked out in every color and style of antebellum costume from the slender, high-waisted Empire gown to the exaggerated crinoline.

A costume party. What a time to arrive! April eased back into the seat, a smile hovering about her lips. Then she sobered as the antebellum mansion rose before her, tall against the sun-blazed sky. Sans Larmes exuded an air of history and permanence. Borrowing from the classic simplicity of ancient Greek temples, it laid regal claim to the vast manicured lawn and the lazily drifting bayou. The limousine pulled to a stop before its portico.

The door swung open, and hot, humid air struck April like a blow.

The chauffeur waved a stocky arm toward the house. "Welcome to Sans Larmes, Miss Jasper."

"Aiee!" A bundle of energy with a silvery topknot burst onto the gallery and flew down the steps on incredibly small feet. Turn-of-the-century high-topped shoes peeked from the dancing hem of her rusty-black dress. "Ah, welcome! Welcome! I am Tante Thalia."

While April was still wondering where the woman had found those shoes, the tiny dynamo engulfed her in a hug.

"Lovely! Lovely! The children, they will be pleased! So will Jules. That last one, she fed on lemons! Are you hungry?

Tired? Thirsty?"

April caught her breath and refrained from saying she was dizzy from Tante Thalia's effusive greeting. "I am a little tired."

"Ach! Naturally!" Tante Thalia's thin arm hooked through April's to lead her up the steps.

Different, April! You wanted different! she reminded herself with a twinge of dismay as she was swept through the broad doorway and plunged into the shining elegance and sophisticated ease of bygone days.

"Miss Jasper?"

The voice came from a woman framed by the fluted columns flanking the entrance to a dainty parlor. She was small and inclined to plumpness, a condition exaggerated by her ruffled pink crinoline. At first glance she appeared young, but a closer look revealed the ravages of time creeping the delicate skin around her eyes. The woman's pale, almost colorless eyes raked April with a chilling hauteur that stiffened her brief nod and nudged her chin up a notch.

"I am Victoria Marshall." The soft southern drawl sounded disapproving. "The children's aunt. You will need my approval as well as that of their uncle Jules. I trust you will prove more suitable than their last nanny."

Dislike. April could feel it. This woman would love to see her fall flat on her face. She straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. "I will do my best."

"If you would step into the parlor."

Said the spider to the fly, April thought ruefully, her heart sinking. Why had she burned her bridges?

"Tante Thalia, you are dismissed. I will ring when I am done with Miss Jasper."

When I am done. It had an ominous ring. April crossed to a small settee upholstered in ice-blue brocade.

Victoria Marshall drifted about the parlor like a plump partridge in search of a nest. Her graceful fingers lovingly traced the raised edge of a small parquet table.

"What do you think of Sans Larmes, Miss Jasper?"

April, prepared for an interrogation about her credentials, was taken aback by the question.

"I . . . I think it's . . . stunning." Well, that was the truth.

"It is, isn't it?" Victoria Marshall's eyes brightened. "I have lived nearby all my life, and I have never tired of it. Nor will I ever." The loving expression in her eyes hardened as they came to rest on April. "I expect to become the mistress of Sans Larmes shortly. If you perform satisfactorily . . ."

You mean, if I keep my claws out of Jules Robichaux.

" . . . you will be retained. If not . . ." She waved a beringed hand.

I will be booted out, bag and baggage. "I had expected someone, ah . . ."

"Older?" April supplied.

"Yes, and someone, ah . . ."

"Matronly?"

A tinge of color rose to Victoria's cheeks. "I see we understand each other, Miss Jasper." Her hands fondled the dusky blue velvet of a wingback chair. "Jules has a . . . a weakness for a pretty face, and . . . for a certain type of woman, his charm can be irresistible."

"We should have no problem, Miss Marshall. You see, I've recently been inoculated against irresistible charmers."

"Excellent, Miss Jasper. Your, ah, inoculation will be put to the test tomorrow morning. As you may have noticed, we are in the midst of our annual antebellum picnic and ball. Jules has spent the last three years working for an oil company in the Middle East. He returned just over a month ago and so must use his time today to re-establish his contacts along the bay-

ou. He cannot spare the time to interview a . . . servant. You are to be in the library at nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

Victoria reached for a small sterling silver bell. "Do you wish to go to your room, or would you rather meet the children now?"

"Now, if it's not a problem."

"None at all."

The metallic tinkling of the bell trickled uneasily along April's nerves. While Tante Thalia summoned the children, she waited with their aunt in an unnerving silence. Victoria Marshall obviously felt no obligation to entertain a servant with pleasant chatter.

A shuffling step sounded at the entry. The children were there. The girl, a snub-nosed elf with taffy-blond ringlets, was dressed in a miniature version of her aunt's crinoline. There would be no problem with her, but the boy . . .

Dark eyes met hers with unwavering hostility. Eyes that dared hers to look at the knobbed wooden cane and the injured leg that hampered his walk. Eyes that dared her to show pity or compassion. Eyes that knew too much of suffering and pain, and too little of love and affection.

"Allain, Yvette, don't stand gawking! Come in. Meet your new nanny, Miss Jasper."

Yvette glanced questioningly toward her brother, and he nodded. Matching her steps to his awkward limping pace, she walked with Allain to the low parquetry table that stood before the settee.

"Yvette! You forget your curtsy!" Victoria Marshall said sharply.

April darted a look at her. A curtsy? So appropriate in this house; so inappropriate in this modern age. The thought set her teeth on edge. "Yvette, Allain," she said softly. At the sound of her voice they drew together so defensively that she had to squelch the impulse to grab them into her arms and shower them with the love they

so obviously needed. "I think we'll do better if you call me by my first name. April."

Yvette's eyes dropped shyly, her dimpled hand reaching out to fidget with the figurine of a dancing lady.

"Yvette!" her aunt shrilled. "That is a valuable porcelain brought here from France by the first Jules Robichaux! How many times have I told you not to touch things?" Yvette jerked her hand back, burying it in the folds of her skirt. "You are excused! Return to the garden, and don't bother your Uncle Jules!"

Allain flashed a dark, hate-filled look at his aunt. Turning, he stumbled against the table. The figurine toppled, rolled to the edge, teetered, and tumbled off to the sound of his aunt's wild cry. As she flew toward him, he righted himself, then stumbled again, and his foot came down atop the fragile porcelain, shattering it. Moving aside with surprising agility, Allain stared expressionlessly as his aunt fell to her knees, distraught tears dripping down her cheeks as she scooped the fragments into her hands, careless of the sharp edges.

April's sudden suspicion was confirmed when Allain's hostile eyes met hers with a glimmer of satisfaction before he took Yvette's hand and began to lead her away.

"You bad, bad boy!" Victoria cried, cradling the shards to her breast as though they were a child in need of comfort. "You and Yvette will go to your rooms! There will be no supper for either of you! Look what you've done! Your uncle Jules will be furious!"

A remarkably adult look of contempt molded Allain's childish features as he turned back to face his aunt. "I did it," he said solemnly. "Yvette shouldn't be punished!"

"You will both go to your rooms instantly! Your uncle Jules will deal with

you tomorrow!"

April clenched her hands so tightly that she felt the bones grind together. Understanding his reason did not change the destructiveness of Allain's act, but she could empathize with him.

"Wretched children!" Victoria burst out. "They don't belong at Sans Larmes!"

"No," April agreed tightly, "they don't."

April did not even glimpse her employer that day, but Tante Thalia gave her the grand tour of the house and grounds. After a stilted, formal dinner, she trudged up the curving stairs to her bedroom, exhausted. She had seen enough disturbed children to recognize neglect when she saw it. Food, shelter, and clothing were not enough. Children needed love. They needed the freedom to discover themselves. They needed the acceptance of loving, caring adults to guide them to maturity. Her heart ached for Allain and Yvette—and for herself.

She had suffered the same anger, the same frustration during her own orphaned youth in a gloomy Bronx brownstone where a child was supposed to be seen and not heard. Her aunt Mary hadn't been a bad woman; she simply knew nothing about children or their needs.

April had grown up looking for the love she missed as a child. Somewhere, she was sure, there was a man who would fill the emptiness in her heart. And then there was Harry, a male model who was nothing less than magnificent. He treated her like a queen, hung on her every word, and adored, so he said; everything about her from her crooked little toe to her thickly fringed sapphire-blue eyes to her curtain of midnight-black hair. It was a fairy-tale romance of roses and candlelight and haunting passion. Later, too late, she learned that Harry adored every woman he met.

April paused at the top of the stairs, absently rubbing the oak banister. No one had ever really needed her. She had been an intrusion into her maiden aunt's orderly life. She had been the base from which Harry could prowl with immunity.

Allain and Yvette needed the love and attention of their uncle and aunt, but it was painfully obvious that Victoria Marshall's heart was consumed by her passion for Sans Larmes. And their uncle? Were the children an intrusion into his life, too?

It was late in the night when April woke with an itch to be up and about. One manicured nail trailing across the lace at her breast, she let her gaze stray to the moonlight pouring through the curtains.

With a rueful sigh she reached for her white satin robe and pulled it on as she got out of bed. She swept the room with a restless look. The antebellum ball was long since over. The music, a curious blend of stately old waltzes, mournful jazz, and foot-stomping Cajun fiddling, had ended. The house was quiet. Too quiet. The only sounds were the muted chirping of crickets and the popping and creaking of old wood. Everyone must be in bed. It would be safe to slip out and walk off her restlessness.

Tiptoeing downstairs on bare feet, she eased through the front door. The alabaster moon hung huge in the night sky as, with a sudden sense of release and excitement, she ran across the portico and over the lush grass, letting her satin skirt billow out behind her. Stopping at last, she leaned against the low-growing limb of an oak and gave herself up to the sensual enjoyment of the scents and sounds of a country night.

Time seemed to reel backwards. Sans Larmes would have looked just so a century or more ago. Had some other young woman once stood in this same spot in the dark of the night? Perhaps waiting for a

lover? Would she have listened impatiently for the snap of a twig to herald his approach? Would he have been the young son of a neighboring planter? Or . . . a gambler? A man with raven-black hair and golden eyes and a look of age-worn cynicism that only she could replace with a look of hope and love?

The gambler, she decided, succumbing to her flight of romantic fantasy—a hold-over from her lonely childhood when day-dreams were her only entertainment.

A strange scent drifted into April's nostrils. She sniffed, trying to define the elusive smell. A cigar? Her imagination was working overtime!

A soft, secretive, delicious smile claimed her mouth. If she were that young girl, she would turn eagerly and find her beloved gambler leaning against the trunk of the tree. Captive to her vivid reverie, April gave a low, seductive laugh and turned . . .

He was there!

Moonlight pierced the lacing limbs overhead to dapple his black hair with streaks of silver and bathe his cheeks with an iridescent glow. Glimmers of light shone in the dark hollows of his eyes, and his teeth gleamed in a widening smile.

The glowing tip of his cigar arched into the darkness as he tossed it behind him, and a shiver of apprehension interfered with April's breathing. He straightened from his slouch against the trunk, and she found her treacherous feet rooted to the damp grass.

"I've been waiting for you," he said, his voice rolling honey smooth from the depths of his throat.

April's heart fluttered wildly. She was alone, in a strange place, with a strange man. Would anyone hear her if she screamed? She pulled back, preparing to run.

"Wait."

The soft-voiced command, brooking no

disobedience, was enforced by the hand covering April's where it clutched at the limb. Heat and strength seeped into her, along with a powerful surge of energy that was at once soothing and exciting.

"Shh," he whispered. "Listen."

April's ears pricked in alarm. Was someone coming? Her employer? She strained for the sound of footsteps. That was all she needed! To be caught having a tryst in the moonlight on her very first day!

"Do you hear it?" he asked in a seductive drawl.

April licked her dry lips. "Hear what?"

He moved closer. The potent masculinity of his cologne, scented with spice and leather, tantalized her nostrils. "Music," he whispered.

The tips of his fingers traced a feathery circle on the back of her hand, and goose bumps clambered up her arm. "Music?" She gasped, blinking in confusion.

"Music," he breathed, moving a step closer and making April feel like a snake-charmed bird. "May I have this dance?"

Before that puzzling request could penetrate, he had whirled her away into a patch of pearly moonlight. Attar of roses perfumed the air as he danced her around a flower bed to the lilting, though unheard, cadence of a waltz. Surprise melted to pleasure, and her fear winked out. His callused palm lay beneath her gently cupped fingers. The tingling intensity of his star-flecked eyes stared from his moonlight-sculpted face as he led her through a series of perfectly executed turns that sent the skirt of her robe sailing out behind her and exhilaration bubbling through her.

Gradually the vigor of the dance waned. April, drugged with pleasure, felt the muscular forearm tighten possessively around her waist, enticing her closer to the lean virility of his solid masculine body. His steps slowed, and the rock-hard sin-

ews of his thighs pressed against hers. His movements slowed still more, and the moist heat of his breath caressed her temple.

"Who are you?" she murmured.

"Jules Robichaux," he answered tersely, before his lips, hot and hard, pressed against the pulse that leaped in her throat.

April came instantly to her senses and pushed against his broad shoulders, lurched out of his arms, and stumbled against a nearby stone bench. Righting herself, she stretched to her full height and pulled her robe tight about her, as if that might ward him off somehow.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were?" she hissed, willing away the lingering tremors of guilt-ridden pleasure.

He shrugged. "Curiosity. I wanted to see how far you would take your . . . game."

"Game!"

"Don't insult my intelligence, Miss Jasper. We both know that *you* knew I was out here."

"Insult your intelligence!" April could barely keep herself from shrieking. "I doubt you have any intelligence to insult!"

Anger, hot and liquid, flared in his eyes.

"If you are to stay, Miss Jasper"—his cold voice lashed her with icy contempt—"you will confine your attentions to the children." He was gone, swallowed up by the looming shadows of the night before April could gather her scattered thoughts.

Confine her attentions to the children! She stared at the spot where he had vanished.

He thought . . . why, he thought . . . Her teeth clicked, then ground together. That arrogant, egotistical wretch.

Lord, the spirit of this place was pervasive! She was even thinking like an antebellum belle!

Morning found April wide awake and

steaming. Her eyes felt gritty. Her mouth tasted like alum. Every time she thought of Jules Robichaux her face burned anew. She prowled her room, pausing occasionally to cross her arms and tap one foot. Stalking past the dressing table, she grimaced at her mirror image. Harry had often compared her midnight-black hair, sapphire-blue eyes, and rose-tinted complexion to Snow White's. If he could see her this morning, he'd swear she looked more like Grumpy.

The situation was intolerable! She could find another job somewhere. The next nanny would be just as concerned for the welfare of the two children. She simply could not work for that . . . that . . .

A knock yanked April from her absorbing search for the perfect epithet to describe her employer. Her eyes dangerously narrowed, she marched to the door.

"Good morning!" Tante Thalia sang cheerily, sailing in to place an antique silver tray of cafe au lait and beignets on the table before the settee. "Did you sleep well?"

"No," April snapped.

"Oh?" Intensely curious eyes studied her flushed face. "You, too? Jules, he look like the thunder this morning. Not to worry. The bark, she is worse than the bite."

"I'm not so sure of that. I met Mr. Robichaux last night."

"Ah." Tante Thalia's wrinkled face brightened with interest. "You step off on the backwards foot, eh?"

April unraveled the question and laughed humorlessly. "Definitely! In fact, I plan to leave today. Will you arrange for me to be taken to the airport?"

Tante Thalia's lined face crumpled into a mask of concern. "But the children!" Her voice cracked on a note of dismay.

"You'll find someone else."

"So we will, but there is no need." She caught April's arm, leading her to the camelback settee. "Sit. Tell Tante Thalia

what Jules have done to make you so angry."

April perched on the edge and watched the elderly woman sit on an equally uncomfortable chair. "He thinks I have an ulterior motive for coming to work here!" Tante Thalia nodded, silently urging her to continue. "He thinks I have . . . have *designs* on him!"

"Ah." The silvery topknot bobbed as Thalia nodded her head. "Yass, I see, me. Now, is for you to understand."

"Understand? I understand perfectly! He is so conceited—"

"No, no, no! Listen to me. When Jules is the young man, his papa die and leave him Sans Larmes. There is not so much money then, just from the sugarcane. Jules, he fall in love. She is beautiful girl, his Lizette, but she wants much more than Jules can give her. So she marry the old man with much money. Jules, he is never the same. Money, she is all he think about. When they strike the oil where he buy much land at New Roads, it make him rich. Rich like the old man who marry his Lizette. But now, do the womens want him or do they want his money? He love the womens, that Jules do, but he never trust one. That Lizette, she steal from him his trust, and no woman ever teach him no better."

"It is unfortunate but I don't see what that has to do with my leaving."

"But of course you do! Forgiveness! Compassion! Pity! Can you find no softness in your heart for a lonely, bitter man who strikes out to hurt others before he himself is hurt?"

In spite of herself, April found her lips curving into a smile. "I believe Mr. Robichaux would strangle anyone who presumed to pity him."

"Ah!" Tante Thalia rocked back in her chair and gave a squeaky laugh. "So! You know something of him already! Will you waste such fine knowledge, April Jas-

per?"

April, amazingly, found herself laughing along with her. "It would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

The old woman pulled a lacy scrap of handkerchief from her pocket and wiped at her tearing eyes. When she looked up once more, her laughter was gone and her expression was solemn. "We hold our pity in our hearts and forgive because we understand. Stay with us. Stay for the little ones."

It wouldn't be easy. But to be needed

April nodded reluctantly. "For Allain and Yvette."

Her decision made for better or worse—and she feared it would be the latter—April bathed and dressed in white linen slacks and a short-sleeved tailored shirt patterned with large red poppies on a white background. Ready for her first duty of the day, she tapped lightly on Yvette's door. Getting no response, she pushed it open to find the girl struggling into a dainty almond-colored dress trimmed with chocolate lace.

"Are you going somewhere today?" she asked as she crossed the room.

One velvety brown eye peered over the lace collar. "No, ma'am."

"Then wouldn't you like to wear something more comfortable to play in?"

"Aunt Victoria says little girls should wear dresses. She won't even let Allain and I swim because she says swimming suits are un—"

"Dignified," April finished for her, her lips thinning. The statement was an echo of her own childhood. Aunt Mary had insisted that she act like a *little lady*. It didn't matter that she would have been happier wearing rags and making mud pies.

While she brushed Yvette's silky curls, she looked around the room and found it

similar to her own childhood space. That is, totally unsuitable for a child. Except for a tall mahogany bookcase filled with dolls, it could have been the anonymous bedroom of a Southern Antebellum Mansion displayed in any American museum. A short talk with Yvette confirmed her suspicions. The dolls were untouchable antiques. Yvette had no doll to be friend, confidante, and sleeping partner. What toys she and Allain had were kept in the playroom in the detached wing. Aunt Victoria did not allow them to clutter their rooms.

While Yvette skipped away to breakfast, April peeked into Allain's room. As expected, the rumpled bed was the only sign of human occupancy. Closing the door with a snick of the latch, she glared at the etched silver knob. Swiveling on her heel, she marched down the hall and then the stairs to find Jules, taking perverse pleasure in the soft pad of her ultramodern sneakers on the ancient Oriental runner.

The murmur of voices beyond the closed library door pulled April up short.

"Victoria," Jules's voice said, "we both know you don't want to marry me. And I sure as hell don't want to marry—period! Allain and Yvette . . ."

The voices dropped to a low murmur, and April looked up and down the hall. Maybe she should move away from the door.

"Sans Larmes needs a mistress!"

Victoria *would* think that. April folded her arms across her chest and scowled at the door.

"Mistress! Hell, you talk like you were born a hundred and fifty years ago! Look, I don't want a wife, but now that you mention it, I *do* need a mistress . . ."

Something crawled across April's knee. Biting back a scream, she reached down to brush at it—and encountered the warmth of a tiny hand. To her horror, she found Yvette's soft brown eyes sparkling

up at her as she pressed her small shell-pink ear to the crack in the door.

"It's Uncle Jules and Aunt Victoria; isn't it?" Her high soprano sang with the piercing sweetness of a flute.

"Yvette," April whispered, her cheeks flaming, "what are you doing here?"

"Listening. Like you," she answered with an angelic smile.

April groaned. What a way to get started! "Sweetheart, it isn't nice to listen at doors."

"But you're doing it, and you're nice," Yvette responded with devastating simplicity.

"No, Yvette. I was wrong. Your Uncle Jules closed the door so he and your Aunt Victoria could talk in private." How was she to explain this? She stooped down so she could meet Yvette's eyes. "We . . . we all do things we shouldn't without thinking about the consequences, like my listening—"

The doorknobs rattled, and the polished oak doors swung open on their well-oiled hinges. The scarred toe of a boot stepped into April's line of vision. Her reluctant eyes climbed the length of his lean legs clad in faded jeans.

She forced her gaze to climb farther, skimming over the clenched jaw with its wildly ticking muscle to meet Jules Robichaux's golden eyes shimmering with . . . laughter!

"Finish explaining your behavior to Yvette!"

The command crackled with an authority that would not be denied, and although it galled her to admit it, she knew he was right. April smoothed the glare from her face and turned back to Yvette.

"Sweetheart, we should always respect other people's privacy. You wouldn't want anyone to listen while you told Alain a secret, would you?"

Yvette shook her head, her eyes darting toward her uncle.

"Now, why don't you run along while I talk to your uncle."

April stood and met his eyes with unflinching steadiness. It wouldn't kill her; it just felt as if it would.

"Uncle Jules?" Yvette's small face was turned up, her neck cricked at an uncomfortable-looking angle as she tugged at the knees of his jeans.

"Yes." He stood tall and imposing, staring down at her.

"She won't ever do it again, Uncle Jules. Let her stay. Please, let her stay so I can pretend she's my mommy."

Jules Robichaux—cynical, world-weary, dangerous Jules Robichaux—flung April a look of pure panic. She could almost hear his gears grinding to a halt on the question: *Hell! How do I answer this?*

April lifted Yvette, perching her on her hip. "Thank you for trying to help me, but you know I was wrong. Your Uncle Jules has every right to ask me to leave, and when he does, you mustn't be angry with him, because—"

"You're staying."

"Honest, Uncle Jules?" Yvette bounced on April's hip, her small face beaming with excitement. "She can stay?"

April watched in astonishment as a beautiful, breathtaking smile tilted the corners of his firm lips and softened the harsh contours of his face, giving him a look of youth and . . . innocence?

Yvette lurched forward, stretching out her arms to her uncle, who took her like a terrified new father holding his child for the first time.

"Promise, Uncle Jules? She can stay?"

"Promise." The bright glitter of his eyes mellowed with a wary tenderness that brought a catch to April's throat.

"I like her, Uncle Jules," Yvette confided in a stage whisper as she squirmed out of his arms and pranced off.

"Let's get something straight, Miss Jasper," Jules said as soon as Yvette was

gone. "I don't trust you. But I do think you'll be good for the children. Tante Thalia approves of you, and she is seldom wrong. It is *her* opinion that you're exactly what Allain and Yvette need. That is why you're still here—on sufferance. One more trick like last night or today, and you're out! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," April whispered in lieu of screaming.

"That will be all." He turned and began walking into his office.

"No, it won't be!" April marched after him, nearly barreling into his chest when he swiveled around. "You have hired me, however reluctantly, to be surrogate mother, mentor, teacher, and friend to Allain and Yvette. I cannot do that under the present conditions."

He hitched one hip over the edge of the desk and folded his arms across his chest. "Oh?"

"If you and I are to have a satisfactory working relationship, you must understand that I have no—I repeat, *no*—interest in you as anything except an employee."

A cavalier smile toyed with the corners of his mouth and sent April's temper climbing. "Go on," he said.

"I'm concerned about the children;" she continued, deciding to stray to a safer topic. "Have you seen their rooms? There is not a single book, not a toy, not a stray sock to show that children live there! Are you aware that Yvette does not have a doll to play with? Not one! A little girl needs a doll! Both she and her brother need to feel they're a part of a family, not naughty little brats getting in everyone's way. Play is children's work! They need to get scruffy and dirty! They need to run and laugh and swim! They must be allowed to be children!"

Jules stared at her for long moments, his expression unreadable. "I agree."

"You agree?" April asked blankly.

"Have them ready in"—he checked his watch—"half an hour. We'll take them in to Thibodaux and get whatever you think they need."

There she was, ready to do battle, arguments marshaled, righteous indignation marked in every taut line of her body—and he was agreeing! Would the man *never* do anything she expected him to do?

Would the man *never* do anything she expected him to do? April wondered again several hours later as she sat in the afternoon sun, watching the children in the pool. Jules had seemed eager to take them to Thibodaux. He'd urged her to get anything the children needed. He'd raised her hopes and theirs. Then he'd dropped them off at Lafourche Plaza like the orphans they were, stuffed a wad of bills into her hand, and said he'd be back in two hours. If she hadn't been so stunned, she would have forgotten Aunt Mary's inhibiting teachings. Didn't he know that Allain and Yvette needed *him* more than they needed *things*?

Obviously not! April huffed with irritation. Just as obviously, the children were not going to be her only pupils. Their uncle had a few things to learn, too!

A wave of satisfaction accompanied the gleam of battle as April watched the children, then their uncle, who finally joined them, looking incredibly handsome in black swim trunks.

As irritated as April was with Jules, she did have him to thank for this auspicious beginning to their next venture. It hadn't even required murder and mayhem; she'd simply asked. The lord and master of Sans Larmes had looked at her as though she was a touch dimwitted and said simply, "The pool was built to be used. In fact, I'll join you." Not quite so simple had been the look on Allain's face. Blank surprise, a softening of pleasure, and remotely there in the darkness of his eyes, a spark of

hope that was quickly extinguished by a cynicism that echoed his uncle's.

Overhead, an engine throbbed, competing with the song of an olive-green warbler perched in a crepe myrtle. A twin-engine Cessna was buzzing the crowns of the oaks, so low she could see the pilot as he dipped his wings in greeting. A smile curving her mouth, her gaze dropped to the shallow end of the pool, where Allain stood watching the plane's flight.

A small boy's fascination with flying—The thought lurched to a halt. Allain's fascination with an airplane would not be normal. It couldn't be when he had been in a crash that killed his parents and injured him. April slid into the water and struck out toward him.

"Allain?"

He pulled his eyes from the plane with an effort that tore at her heart. Shuddering, he sank deep into the water and glided away from her. April turned to watch him and saw Jules sitting on the opposite edge, a frown furrowing his brow as he followed Allain's progress toward the diving board. His eyes then met hers, and he eased into the water. Long, easy strokes brought him to her side.

"Do you think he remembers?" he asked, watching Allain grip the edge of the pool.

"Of course he does. Children never forget as much as adults think they do. He needs to talk about it. Has anyone tried to get him to?"

"I, uh, I don't know." His eyes shifted away from the condemning look she flashed at him. "I guess I should have come back for more than the funeral."

She had no right to ask. After all, she was a mere servant. "Why didn't you?"

His shoulders squared as he raked a hand through his hair, flinging droplets of water that caught the sun like diamonds. "I was under contract. It would have been hard to get out of it."

"But not impossible," she said through clenched teeth, hating him for his blind disregard of Allain's needs.

"No, not impossible." He sighed and frowned, a look of guilt wafting across his features like a cloud dimming the creamy yellow spring sun. "I spent a lot of time away from Sans Larmes after my brother married, and I didn't know the children very well. I thought they needed a mother, and Victoria . . ." His voice trailed away. "I guess I was wrong."

"Yes, I guess you were," April said bitterly.

The lazy spring day yielded graciously to a lazy spring night caressed by ripely scented breezes. April might have enjoyed it if she hadn't been so worried about Allain. He was, even for him, abnormally quiet. Lost in his own thoughts, he jumped at every sound and retreated deeper within himself.

Her offer to read him a story at bedtime was rejected with "Stories are for babies." She tried to leave his light on, but lights were for babies, too.

"If you need me, I'm just across—"

"I won't," he said.

His umber eyes followed her with an unconscious yearning that wrenched at her heart.

"Good night, Allain," she whispered as she clicked off the light. He didn't answer, but she didn't expect him to. Alone in the darkness of her room, she sat fully clothed on the camelback settee, waiting.

Moonlight crawled across the floor in lengthening bands of silver gilt. The old house creaked and groaned while April thought about all the hours Allain had been left alone with his memories and his fears. The night breeze murmured of days long gone while she worried about days to come. Her eyelids grew heavy. Her head nodded. She slept the troubled, restless sleep of dread.

The scream she had been waiting for yanked her from her slumber with her heart slamming against her ribs. She leaped up and ran to Allain's room. He was sitting up in bed, his head thrown back, his face contorted.

"Help! Help! Help!" he shrieked as April lurched across the room and leaped atop the bed to sweep him into her arms.

"It's all right, Allain. It's just a nightmare. A nightmare."

Feet and chest bare, Jules barreled into the room, buttoning black serge trousers.

"Nobody came," Allain whispered, horror adding a husky timbre to his voice and strength to the fingers digging deep into her back. "It was dark, and I waited and waited, but nobody came. Mother . . . she kept saying, 'Help me. Help me.' But I couldn't! My leg . . . it hurt . . . it hurt so bad! I tried to move, but I couldn't."

His voice cracked and stilled, and April rocked him back and forth, cradling him close while his sobs shook them both.

"Really, Jules! It isn't good to coddle him after a nightmare! It isn't as if this is the first time," Victoria's voice rang out.

April's head snapped up, her hand fanning across the back of Allain's head to pull him closer, as though his aunt might snatch him out of her arms.

"This has happened before?" Jules's question was heavy, hard, and threatening.

"Of course. Children have nightmares. It's perfectly normal, but there is no reason to coddle—"

"Coddle? My God, Victoria! Do you know what his nightmare is about?"

"The usual things I would sus—"

Jules's hand shot out, clenching Victoria's arm with a speed that jerked a gasp from both Victoria and April. "Get out," he gasped in a rough-edged voice that hinted of a loss of control.

Victoria scurried out with a teary-eyed sniff. Moving stiffly, Jules knelt beside

the bed. He reached out to touch Allain's shuddering back. His hand hovered an inch away; stopped, and curled into a fist that dropped to his own knee. Guilt contorting his features, he bent his proud head.

April's sad gaze moved across the gleaming thickness of ebony hair. She saw the convulsive working of his jaw and heard his thick swallow, and her hardened heart melted with pity.

Allain's ratcheting sobs blowing moist across her neck, she stared down at his uncle. He would reject any comfort she might offer. She knew it, yet she could not stop her hand from reaching out.

Jules's head came up slowly, his amber eyes searching hers. His fist uncurled, and his hand rose to cover hers, his lashes fanning down to shield his gaze.

He had accepted the solace she offered!

Would the man *never* do anything she expected him to do? she wondered, uncomfortably conscious of the tenderness that had taken irritation's place.

Four mornings later, Jules appeared at the door to the children's playroom. It was perfectly normal by now for him to join her and the children for their afternoon swim. It was not normal for him to invade the playroom during morning lessons. But there he was, darkening the sunlit doorway and dimming April's mood.

"It's time I got a report on the children's work," he said shortly.

"Please, come in." Her voice cracked and faded, and she bent to straighten the papers scattered across the table. He was only a man, and her employer at that, she reminded herself, shivering from frazzled nerves. He was irritating, aggravating, and frustrating. He was overbearing, arrogant, and cynical. He was—her gaze skittered toward him—riveting.

"Wanna see, Uncle Jules?" Yvette sang out, as she pushed him into a slat-back

ocking chair. He was barely settled when he scrambled onto his lap, wriggling round until she was comfortable. Raising an angelic smile to him, she held out her drawing.

"See?" One small finger stabbed at a corner of the page. "That's a tree and that's a puppy! And that's the kind of house me and Allain are gonna have when we grow up. A log cabin, just for us. And we're gonna play all the time! And won't nobody tell us not to run and not to touch. Uh, Allain?"

Jules's smile faded, and a frown pinched his brows as his eyes met April's darkening with a guilt and regret she didn't want to see, didn't want to respond to.

"You could come live with us, Uncle Jules!" Yvette said brightly. "You and April could both live with us, and we could have fun all the time."

"What would I do with Sans Larmes?" he asked, his struggle for a light tone apparent in the uneven timbre of his voice.

"You could leave Aunt Victoria here! She'd like that!"

"Yes, she would." The smile Jules lashed was genuine, but the eyes that touched April's were dark with thought.

"Wanna see Allain's paper? He got a whole hundred!"

It was Yvette who picked up Allain's arithmetic test and waved it triumphantly under Jules's nose. It was Yvette who did the talking, while Allain sat quietly, his only evidence of pleasure in the soft glow of his eyes.

"This is very good, Allain," he said stiffly.

"Thank you, sir," Allain said just as stiffly.

"Do you, uh"—he searched for something to say—"like arithmetic?"

"Yes, sir."

"He does!" Yvette's chin dipped and bobbed. "He likes it a lot! He says he

wants to be a ge . . . ge . . . what you are when he grows up."

"A geologist? Is that what you'd like to do, Allain?"

April saw Jules's eyes illuminated by a startled surprise that softened to the burnished gold of pleasure. The look betrayed a vulnerability that pierced her guard and left her, suddenly, as vulnerable as he.

"Yes, sir," Allain said softly.

April waited during the silence that fell, aware that neither Jules nor Allain knew quite what to say next. Would anything shatter the wall of pride that stood between them? Togetherness certainly had not succeeded. During their daily swims, Jules had taught Allain the butterfly stroke and dived for nickels with him. But they spent time together without being *together*. They didn't talk *with* each other; they talked to, at, and around each other.

Jules cleared his throat, and Yvette's eyes widened with glee, propelling April into speech. "Maybe you could take Allain with you the next time you go to New Roads to check on your oil wells. You can show him what a geologist does."

Jules's gaze, alight with relief and thanks, streaked toward April. "That's a good idea if, uh, he'd like to go."

Allain's bent head rose slowly, his shining eyes the only sign of the happiness hidden beneath his solemn expression. "I'd like that, sir," he whispered.

"So would I."

The gruffness in Jules's voice told April that he and Allain were at their emotional saturation point. It would be best for them to end the moment now. She stood reluctantly. "Allain, Yvette, lessons are over. You can go out to play now."

Yvette's drawing floated to the floor. "Hurry, Allain! Hurry!"

Allain climbed to his feet, carefully bracing himself on his cane. Limping steps took him to Jules. "Thank you for

coming in today, sir. Yvette likes to see you," he said, his chin held high in an excess of pride.

The angle reminded April of nothing so much as his uncle. She watched Jules nod and waited until Allain was gone. "He likes to have you here, too," she said softly. "You made him very happy today."

He stood and rolled the tension from his shoulders and raised a hand to squeeze the nape of his neck. "I should have come in long before this."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," she said, sympathy softening her voice. "Children are very forgiving. It's what you do now that matters."

Those bright golden eyes that could snap with anger or take on a lazy, predatory gleam touched April and lingered with a wary curiosity.

"Do you realize that you have brought something to Sans Larmes that hasn't existed here since before I was born?"

"And what is that?" she asked in a near whisper.

"Love, Miss Jasper." The words sounded deep and rough, as if summoned from some forgotten distance.

April suddenly felt his loneliness. A loneliness that reached out to her, binding her with tendrils of shared sorrow.

Awareness grew in the torrid gold of his eyes. An awareness that transcended place and time and condition. An awareness that sang of man and woman . . . of desire. April turned away and fled the room—while it was still possible.

The murmur of Jules's voice and the tapping of Allain's cane outside her bedroom window woke April one morning to the blush of sunrise. She listened, half awake, the sounds slowly mingling with her disquieting thoughts.

During the past month, while spring reached full maturity in a glorious blaze of color and a heady plethora of scents, Jules

Robichaux had retreated. He had allowed her that one glimpse of his tenderness, but that had been all. She told herself that she should be satisfied that he at least showed interest in the children.

After floundering through an emotional wasteland since her divorce, the last thing she wanted was another man. Yet the sound of Jules's step accelerated her heartbeat. Her eyes followed him despite all orders to the contrary.

Restlessness skittered through April, pulling her from the bed. Sweeping up her satin robe, she walked to the window and drew aside the white lace curtain. Allain and Jules ambled along, roughly dressed and unhurried. Allain tilted back his head to look up at his uncle. The strap of his new high-power binoculars lay heavy across the nape of his neck. Jules's hand rested easily on Allain's shoulder. A heavy canvas knapsack hung across his back, filled, she knew, with a thermos of cafe au lait, doughnuts, and books to identify the birds they would see. Three mornings a week for a month now they had been sneaking out to watch the birds greet the day. Though it had surprised April and shocked Victoria, it hadn't surprised Tante Thalia at all.

"Birds!" Thalia had exclaimed. "That Jules, he always love them birds. He was going to be an ornithologist once. Went off to university and everything!"

"What happened?" April had asked.
"That Lizette! She happen! He come in here one day wit' the laughter knock plumb outa him. He say to me, there ain't no money in birds, and he got to have money. Lots of money. And that's all that boy done think about from that day." Thalia's dark eyes shifted to April with the glimmer of a satisfied smile. "Till here lately, for true."

Till here lately. The children had done that for him, April thought. There was a new softness in his eyes when he looked at

Allain and Yvette, a softness that cooled when he turned a wary gaze to her.

Below, Allain and Jules approached a shiny-leaved magnolia. Jules paused, hesitated. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he turned. His chin tilted up, and his eyes climbed unerringly, finding her window, her eyes.

The shock of gazes meeting, mating, sent a heated glissade of emotion curling through April's veins. It was a sweet assault on her senses. An assault that reminded her she was a woman who needed a man's loving touch. A woman who needed everything a man had to give.

Love, Miss Jasper. Love. The words were an eerie refrain that whispered nightly through her dreams. How sad it was that love was alien to him. If she was wise, she would reject the tremulous emotions that struggled for birth in her heart. Unfortunately, she feared she was not. Common sense had become a stranger to her since she'd first set foot on the portico below.

The curtain fell from April's hand, and she turned, letting her satin robe slide down her arms and spill over the rug.

She wanted Jules Robichaux—just as he had expected her to, but for very different reasons. The thought nipped at April's burgeoning desire like a late frost nipping at the tender green buds of early spring. And like those buds, her desire, her hope, her half-remembered dream shriveled and withered and died.

He thought she had come to Sans Larmes for more than a job. He thought she had come on a hunt for a rich husband. If she wanted to confirm his mistaken assumption, all she had to do was respond to him as a woman to a man. If she did, he would go on his unhappy way, convinced that every woman was a spiritual sister to the faithless, money-loving Lizette. If she didn't, she might be the one to give him the gift of trust—a trust that might enable

him to love another woman.

Common sense had not deserted her, after all. She really had no choice. No choice at all. The April who hungered and needed and desired would have to submerge herself beneath the calm, collected exterior of a mere governess.

Jules surprised April the next day by informing her that he was taking her and the children for a holiday at the Robichaux Camp on Grand Isle. He would not explain further—only saying that he thought they could all use "a break" from Sans Larmes for a while.

Two days later they were all piled into a Jeep that was rolling along the road that hugged the gulf side of Grand Isle.

A narrow strip of land, splotched with grass struggling up through the sand, lay between the road and the beach. Like many of the structures in that row, the Robichaux camp was an old shotgun house that had been moved to the island and set on top of creosoted pilings.

The Jeep bumped and rattled into the rutted yard, its passengers tingling with excitement. April tumbled out quickly to avoid being trampled by the chomping-at-the-bit Yvette. Allain followed, more slowly but no less eagerly, immediately making his way to a low weed-choked dune to stare at the warm waves cresting on the beach.

"Can we go swimming, sir?" he asked.

Jules, leaning negligently against the hood, smiled at April. "Can we go swimming, teach?"

His smile went straight to her head like the intoxicating fumes of a well-aged brandy. It left her giddy and vulnerable and ominously fearful of the days that lay ahead. "We'll unload, then swim. How's that?" she asked.

His smile, broadening with a winsome ease, was her answer. An answer that melted her reserve and fluttered through

her heart.

Minutes later, Jules, a box of groceries in his arms, shouldered his way through the front door of the house, followed by April. "Be careful. The floor's still damp. I called Mrs. St. Pierre and asked her to clean the house and air it out. She'll come by every morning, so you won't have to worry about that while we're here."

April crossed the threshold and paused to look around:

"Jules," she breathed, his name slipping out as easily as if she were accustomed to using it, "it's wonderful!"

"Hardly that." He continued through the house with the box of groceries.

"Oh, but it is!" April followed him, pausing in the second room to put down the suitcases and brush her hand across the patched spread covering one of the two mismatched double beds. "Allain and Yvette won't have to worry about breaking anything here. They can run and play and be themselves."

He came to the doorway and leaned a shoulder against it, folding his muscular arms across the masculine contours of his chest.

"And you, April? Can you relax and be yourself here?"

She started but did not look his way. "I'm not here to relax. I'm here to—"

"But you are," he said with a firmness that drew her gaze to his luminous eyes. "You haven't taken a day off since you came to Sans Larmes. We wouldn't want to work you too hard and . . . lose you."

The vibration of sincerity totally muddled April's conclusions about his reason for this trip. "But I enjoy my work," she faltered, her gaze coasting away.

"I know you do," he said softly. His voice caressed her even as it shouldered the axis of her world off balance. "But all work and no play makes April a dull girl," he added lightly.

He walked to her, trapping her gaze. A

shaft of sunlight poured across his hair, giving it a liquid-ebony sheen. He stood so close she could see the black flecks in the bright gold of his eyes like shadows falling across his soul.

"I haven't thanked you for what you've done for Allain and Yvette. They're different children since you've come to . . . us."

She looked away and swallowed hard. "Allain still holds himself apart. He's afraid to trust again."

"No, he isn't," Jules murmured. "He's only afraid to admit it."

The bass tremor of his voice vibrated through April, pulling her gaze like a magnet. Her blue eyes, dark with questions, met the steady gold of his. Was it possible he was speaking of more than Allain? Was he talking about himself, too?

Thus began a series of sun-splashed days and moon-washed nights quivering with an undercurrent of awareness that swept away April's peace.

As the curtain of night rose to reveal the morning sky, Jules's eyes would search hers across a breakfast platter of pan-fried flounder he and Allain had caught in the surf.

With dawn brightening the sky, they would drive out to the low concrete bridge to fish for speckled trout. While Jules explained the intricacies of his casting reel to Allain, his eyes would drift toward April, touching her lips, her throat, the curve of her hip beneath her cut-off jeans, until it seemed her every nerve fluttered to life, until her skin tingled from the mere touch of the salty breeze.

Awareness of man and woman, of needs sending out tendrils of desire that would weave through the days and the nights, encircling her heart and wakening her to an increasing restlessness of body and spirit.

She gave fervent thanks a thousand

times a day for the presence of Allain and Yvette, who diffused the tension and forced her to hold her capricious emotions in check. Allain's skin darkened to a nut brown; Yvette became a honey-colored bundle of energy. Yvette's rosy mouth assumed a perpetual smile; Allain's smile resided in the glow of his eyes. Each blossomed before April's eyes. April knew that her life had never been so complete, or her heart so full.

She told herself the reason for the happiness flooding her heart was Allain's and Yvette's growing self-confidence, their joyful excitement in each new day. But she knew there was something more.

Jules had shed his shield of world-weariness cynicism like a lone wolf shedding his winter coat. He smiled easily. He laughed often. Sometimes she could almost forget they weren't a family like the St. Amants next door.

Max, tall and skinny and dark, and Patsy, short and plump and fair, were the parents of two freckled towheads who had befriended Yvette and Allain. They were also longtime friends of Jules's . . .

"Please, April!" Yvette sang, while Allain leaned on his cane with his own plea lighting his eyes. "Please, Miss April!" Maxie and Marcie echoed.

"Do let them spend the night, April. We have plenty of room, and they'd enjoy it so," Patsy St. Amant urged.

"I know they would, but I'll have to ask Jules."

"Ask Jules what?" His deep voice floated down from a grass-covered sand dune near the beach.

Four small heads whipped around. Four sets of eyes blazed with hope.

"Please, Uncle Jules!" "Please, Mr. Jules!"

"Hold on!" Jules laughed, plunking a hand atop Yvette's head to hold her still. "April?"

"Patsy has asked them to spend the night with Maxie and Marcie," April said.

"I see. Well, there should be no problem with that."

Childish cheers filled the air, and the rest of the day sped past, the hours ticking away like seconds. In no time at all the children were packed and gone with a last wave and an excited, "Bye, April," as they scurried down the steep wooden steps. No time at all until she turned back into the kitchen and saw Jules leaning against the knotty pine counter, arms folded across his chest, a beam of sunlight brightening his lazy smile.

It hit her then. She was alone with him. She would be alone with him . . . all night.

"Why don't you shower and change?" he said. "I'll fire up the grill and put on some potatoes. We'll eat steak tonight, if that's all right with you. I've had about all the fish I can take for a while."

"That . . . that's fine," she lied.

The deck, broad and sturdy on its stilts, was awash with silvery moonlight, with the tangy seabreeze, with a familiar throbbing tension.

Jules, one hip hitched over the white railing, one bare foot planted on the thick plank flooring and the other dangling and swaying, drank deeply of a ruby burgundy. The round base of the long-stemmed glass rested on his denim-clad thigh.

His eyes shifted to April, who stood next to him drinking her wine. "You didn't eat very much."

"I wasn't hungry."

His tapping foot disturbed the skirt of her yellow sundress, swishing the fabric against her bare thigh in an erotic caress that scaled her leg, settled in the pit of her stomach, and fluttered there like the frantically beating wings of a captured bird. She nervously brought her glass to her mouth once more, tilting it high and gulping . . . air.

Bereft of the wine's comfort or courage—she didn't know which—she set the glass on the railing. Fear finally prompted her to realize it was time to seek safety, to go inside.

As she started to turn away, Jules's hand locked itself around her wrist like a shackle, gently but firmly. "Don't go in yet, April."

Her eyes dropped to his hand, a dark bond holding her with muscular warmth.

"My . . ." Her tongue skimmed across her dry lips. "My glass is empty."

His hand tightened around her wrist. "Don't you think you've had enough? You've been drinking it like water. Unless you're accustomed to drinking so much . . ."

He didn't finish. The statement hung in the air between them, and April's shoulders slumped. "No," she admitted softly, studying his bare foot, "I usually don't drink at all."

"Do you have to anesthetize yourself in order to endure my company?"

She studied his profile, lined in silvery light. "You . . . you aren't the easiest man to be . . . to be around."

He turned slowly, revealing a funny, sad smile. "And you aren't the first woman to tell me that." He paused as if considering whether to say more. One finger traced the lip of his glass, and he turned toward the sea once more. "But you *are* the first woman who has made me regret it. Maybe it's because you're the first woman who has seemed . . . real to me in a . . . long time."

Real. It held a ring of loneliness, a ring of cynicism, a ring of hope. A sweet stirring of pleasure struggled against the backwash of trepidation.

He leaned toward her, his fingers cupping her chin. His thumb stroked her parted lips, a gentle abrasion of flesh to flesh.

She should wrench away, run. Her mind screamed warnings and threatened a

future of regret, but her body betrayed her with a trembling weakness and her heart responded only with a treacherous longing. Thought yielded to feeling, and her lips formed his name.

"Jules," she whispered, "we shouldn't . . ."

"Please, April." He had uttered a word she thought she would never hear from him. A word that melted her resistance. "I've wanted to kiss you since that night beneath the oaks. I've wanted to apologize a thousand times for what I said and what I thought."

"Jules, this is not a game for me."

"It isn't one to me either. I've never met a woman like you, April."

His lips molded themselves to hers in an elemental demand. One hand cradled the nape of her neck, slipping supple fingers through the curtain of her hair. The other hand caressed her back, then eased down to pull her against his loins.

Sanity quivered, shuddered, and shattered before the buffeting heat of his body and the violent whipping of her emotions. Though her mind tried to fling darts of warning into the chaos of her thoughts, her starved senses quickened with a painful acuity.

His hot, devouring mouth locked with hers, he swept her into his arms and carried her across the deck and into the bedroom. Her hands cradled his head; her fingers caressing the smooth tendrils of his hair. Her senses were bombarded by the coolness of the breeze and the heat of his mouth, by the smell of the sea and the smell of man, by the strength of his supporting arms, by the taste of wine and the flavor of Jules Robichaux.

The house was cool and still and quiet. The bed was soft and quickly warmed beneath their closely entwined bodies. Her need meshed with his in one unified whole, hers easing out in a purr, his in a growl of arousal. She pressed her palms

against the steely cage of his ribs, heard the strangled intake of his breath, and felt him go still beneath her touch, as if to soak the brush of her palms into his very soul. He lay, achingly silent and breathless, while she shamelessly undressed him, then allowed him to do the same to her.

"April," Jules groaned against her throat as they melted again into each other's arms, "April, I need you."

"I know," she consoled through the clamor of disjointed thoughts. It was his need that had seduced her unwilling heart. A need whose full dimensions she feared he did not recognize. His heart beat against hers, a wild frenzied racing. Bare flesh to bare flesh. Smooth, creamy skin to dark, furred skin. Feminine to masculine. Hot to hot. Wanting to wanting. Lips met and melded with a single need.

Gently Jules filled her with the proof of his desire. His arms trembled beside her head. His hands quivered in the thickness of her hair. A low sound, an animal growl of ecstasy and anguish, purred low in his throat.

His heart pounded against hers. His lips claimed hers. A slow, sleek thrust sent her arching against him with a gasp of pleasure. For this moment, he was hers as she was his. That knowledge transported her into the rarefied realm of rapture. Her hands pressed against his heaving back, pulling him closer. His slow, rocking movements escalated, pushing her ever onward, ever upward. Loneliness banished, hearts united, they strove for elusive perfection. It came, bringing with it an exquisite pleasure and pain: the pleasure in emotions driven to explosive limits, the pain in the recognition that perfection is fleeting.

Her eyelashes firmly anchored to her cheeks in resentful resistance to beginning the day, April woke slowly. She felt . . . wonderful! Why?

A cautious eye opened and found a hairy leg lying outside the covers. Her heart did a skipping two-step and whirled into a foot-stomping bolero against her ribs. Her other eye popped open, and her head whipped around.

Jules lay on his stomach, his pillow beneath his chest. The crown of his head, a wild tangle of ebony hair, rested against the headboard. Over the curve of his bicep, April could see one closed eye with long black lashes fanning innocently across his cheek. The shiny curve of his eyebrow arched in lazy repletion.

The night returned in a rush of bright images and echoing sounds, sensations that rippled across her flesh and emotions that swept through her like a gale.

Easing from the bed with a regretful sigh, April tiptoed away. She showered quickly, dressed, and checked to find Jules undisturbed. Then she headed outside to watch Yvette and Allain play in the surf with their friends.

Allain, tanned and laughing and glistening wet, dove into a rolling breaker with a graceful motion he could achieve only in the water. He was close, April knew, so very close to opening his heart and trusting her. As Jules had last night? Had she mistaken physical desire for emotional need?

Nearby, Max and Patsy St. Amant sat on beach towels watching over the children.

"Maxie, don't go too far out," Patsy called, then settled back to share a caressing look with her husband. "I'm glad Jules asked us to keep the children last night," April overheard her say. "They really did have a good time, even if we didn't get a wink of sleep. I think I'm getting too old . . ."

Jules asked us to keep the children . . . asked us to keep the children . . . asked us . . . asked! April's body jerked to taut, quivering attention. But Patsy had asked

her as if it was her own idea. Why? Why would . . .

He would get her down here, smile at her, soften her up like taffy pudding on a windowsill. Then he would make his move.

Wintry despair froze April's heart. It had been neither physical desire nor emotional need that had driven Jules last night. It had been, instead, his determination to prove that she was the woman he thought she was. He engineered the whole night. He played on her weakness as skillfully as Harry had once played on her senses. He took her trust and ground it beneath his heel, just as Harry had done. He took her love . . .

Anger flowed through her in a torrent of heat that melted her frozen heart and banished the pain. It grew, strengthening her will and her resolve. Rage spun her around and sent her skimming up the steps, across the deck. The slamming door propelled her through the kitchen and into the bedroom.

Jules lay undisturbed, sleeping as peacefully as an innocent baby—and that seemed to be the worst insult of all. Her fingers curled into fists. She eyed her rumpled pillow, leaped for the bed, snatched it up, and let fly.

"How could you?" she shouted as the pillow slammed against his head.

Jules swiveled around and up with a muffled, "Wha . . . wha . . . what—"

"How could you?" she shouted and whacked him across the face.

The pillow split. Fluffy feathers shot out in an explosion of white. Jules's head rebounded from the headboard with a thump that made her wince.

"You planned last night! You asked Patsy to invite the children to spend the night, just so you could get me alone and . . . and . . . and seduce me!"

His eyes widened into the unmistakable look of a culprit caught redhanded, and a

wave of ruddiness infused his cheekbones.

"April, I swear"—the bed creaked as he stood—"it wasn't like that at all!"

"It wasn't like that?" April sneered her disbelief. "Did you ask Patsy to take the children? Did you ask her to say it was her idea?"

"Yes, but . . . ah-choo!" The sneeze bent him double, and he whipped back up, his teary eyes glaring. His hand snapped around her arm, and he dragged her into the kitchen, out of the cloud of feathers. She snatched her arm free, backing toward the counter while he sniffed once, twice, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Listen to me, April. Last night—"

"Last night was a mistake," she said flatly. She saw a curious shifting of emotion in the depths of his eyes, an emotion akin to the pain that was twisting inside her. Why pain? Shouldn't he be wearing his triumph like a victor's laurels?

"A mistake?" he growled.

Rage—a rage that made hers seem paltry in comparison—emanated from him in palpable waves that pushed April back another step. Where was the cold satisfaction she had expected to see? Why this seething anger that bulged the veins in his temples?

"Go ahead, April! Tell me how I took advantage of you! Tell me you didn't want me as much as I wanted you!"

The truth killed her questions about his unexpected response and roused her to an icy, mindless fury. She yielded a final step and felt the sharp edge of the counter dig into her back, but her chin tilted in an attitude of defiance.

"What woman wouldn't want you, Jules? You're intelligent, masculine, fascinatingly elusive, and wealth—"

Jules jerked as if the unfinished word were a bullet plowing into his chest. April stopped, dismayed and confused by what she had done. She hadn't meant to hurl

that particular piece of caustic sarcasm. Or had she? Jules had the stunned, uncomprehending look of a man who has been dealt a crippling blow from an unexpected quarter.

In that moment, April saw his disillusionment. In that moment, she saw the death throes of something precious and fragile. In that moment, she knew that whatever his reason for arranging their night alone, he had not lied to her. Not with his body. Not with his words. Last night Jules had taken a first tenuous step toward trust. This morning she had destroyed it.

They returned to Sans Larmes the next day, farther apart than when they'd left. After that, summer waxed hot and dry. Jules found business to take him away from Sans Larmes. During his long absences, April's hopes struggled for renewed life. The hope that time would heal the raw wound she had dealt him. The hope that he would stop to wonder why she had been so angry and hurt. The hope that she could someday forgive herself for the cruelty of what she had done.

She came to dread his every return, when he would summon her to the library to report on the children's progress. Each time they would exchange the bare minimum of words: his clipped and cold; hers soft and hesitant. Then he would dismiss her with a crisp command to send word through Tante Thalia if Allain or Yvette needed anything while he was gone.

Passivity and acceptance were not normal for her, but a strange lassitude held her captive. She felt unusually tired, unusually dull. She had no appetite and no energy. She wanted desperately to leave, but Allain and Yvette chained her with tender ties of love.

On a searing July morning April woke and flung out her arms to anchor herself to the spinning bed while waves of nausea

swept over her. She heard the tap of a cane in the hall and called out weakly, "Allain! Allain!"

He peeped around the door, then rushed in with his hitching step. "April?"

She swallowed a surge of nausea, retaining her grip on the bed. "Tell Tante Thalia I need her."

He hurried out, his cane thump-thumping and his voice raised to shout "Tante Thalia! Come quick!"

Minutes later she was bent over the bed, the dry heat of her hand pressed to April's forehead. "No fever. If this the flu, it ain't like none I ever seen. I'll go call Dr. Sam, then I'll call Jules. That boy oughta be home!"

"No!" April clutched Tante Thalia's wrist. "No, don't call Jules! There's nothing he can do, and I . . . I don't want him here."

"Humph! Seems to me he oughta be here," the old woman grumbled, but she finally agreed and shooed the hovering Allain from the room as she left.

April dozed fitfully, waking to Sam Brittain's booming voice. He was a big, red-haired bear of a man, an old friend of the family who April had met several times. He poked and prodded, said to give it a day or two, then left with a frown wrinkling his ruddy brow. Two days later, when he breezed in and found her no better, he voiced his suspicions. It was only then that April accepted what she had somehow known all along—that she was pregnant with Jules's baby.

Caught by the oldest trick in the world.

April could hear Jules saying it. She could see the cynical twist of his lips and the disgust in his eyes. If he had thought at first that she came to Sans Larmes to snare a rich husband, how much more so would he think it now? She swore Sam to silence about her condition and vowed to escape Sans Larmes before her pregnancy was apparent.

All through August, April wished things could be different.

Unfortunately, wishing never changed anything. The reality was that she was carrying the child of a man who was incapable of admitting to love even if he felt it. Sometimes she thought if only she dared she might break down his wall of fear. In saner moments she knew that she could batter herself senseless without breaching that wall. The well-protected bastion of Jules's distrust would remain inviolate. The fortress would not fall until Jules himself wanted to change, to trust, to love and be loved. And the cold, cruel reality was that he didn't. He saw love as a weakness, and he would never be weak.

He returned to Sans Larmes, silent, somber, and rigidly in-control. They exchanged few words, and those stilted. They exchanged many looks, and those quickened by painful remembrance.

She suffered an occasional bout of morning nausea, an occasional spinning dance of vertigo, and more often painful muscle spasms that she shrugged off as charley-horses, while one day rolled into the next with terrifying speed.

In the gray days of late August, Sans Larmes sprang to life in preparation for the annual Labor Day picnic. Workers came in to clean the house from the ground floor to the attic. Tante Thalia rushed about like a tiny bird unsure just where to light. April, Allain, and Yvette found safe harbor in the playroom.

Too quickly Labor Day arrived. A laughing, talking, horde of guests descended on the emerald lawn dotted with tables sagging beneath the weight of an endless array of dishes. The pungent pepperiness scent of crab boil wafted on the humid air. Cajun French mingled with English over the music of banjo and fiddle.

The shadow of a spreading oak protect-

ed April from the searing sun as she sat alone on a stone bench, apart from the crowd. She had been abandoned by Allain and Yvette, who were whisked away by a giggling group of cousins.

"Here you are!"

Sam Brittain's booming voice brought April's head swinging around.

Without a hitch in his step, he reached her, caught her wrist, pulled her up, and hauled her into the deepening shadows of the trees. Polite preliminary skirmishings were abandoned for direct attack.

"I think it's time you told Jules about the baby."

Her arms folded protectively across her waist. "I can't do that."

"Why not? It's obvious you're crazy in love with the man! The only one who doesn't know it is Jules himself!"

"Sam, he doesn't want to know. You're his friend. You know—"

"A hell of a friend," he grumbled. "Jules has a right to know about this baby! He would marry you. He'd make a good husband, too. He'd give you anything you wanted—"

"Anything, Sam? Would he give me his trust or his love?" She waited for an answer, but his blue eyes slid away from contact with hers. "I know he'd marry me, out of a sense of duty. What kind of marriage would that be?"

"If you could only give him some time. I think he's in love with you now but too afraid to admit it."

"He'll always be too afraid to admit it. Sam, I've already made one mistake. I don't want to make another. I'm not willing to take a chance with my baby's future. I have to leave Sans Larmes."

"Look, I don't want you to do anything stupid. When you decide to go, I want to know about it, and I want to help you. If you need anything, anything at all—"

"You said you loved us!" Allain's voice stabbed into April's heart. "You prom-

ised! You promised you wouldn't leave!"

She whirled around to see him in the gloomy shadows. His eyes were huge and accusing in his pale face, and clutched in his hand was a wilting bouquet of wildflowers.

"Allain, I—"

"No!" he cried, dropping the flowers and throwing his cane against the trunk of a sycamore. "You're just like all the rest! You don't care. Nobody cares about us!" he screamed and spun around, running off with his awkward hitching gait.

"Allain! Allain!" April shouted. "Oh, God! Sam, he'll hurt himself!"

With Sam sprinting into the lead, April raced around the thick trunks of oaks, through cool shadows and hot sunlight. A thin cry, reedy and shrill with pain, brought her to a stumbling halt.

"April!" Sam roared. "Over here!"

She found them. Allain lay outstretched, his face contorted and deathly pale, while Sam's thick hands gently moved over his leg. She sank down beside them, her shaking hand reaching out to touch the pale curve of Allain's cheek.

"Don't touch me!"

The smell of wintergreen and rubbing alcohol saturated Allain's room, a smell April knew she would ever after associate with guilt and betrayal. Sam leaned over the bed. Tante Thalia was at his side, her hands busily wringing out alternating hot and cold towels.

Night had fallen. The guests were gone. Jules sat in the creaking rocker with Yvette sleeping in his lap. April had been relegated to the perimeter of the group, an outsider now that Allain knew she was leaving and refused her help.

Her gaze, sick with longing and despair, met the cautious expressionlessness of Jules's eyes for a pain-fraught moment before she turned away and walked woodenly from the room.

Descending the stairs one slow step at a time, she fought the sob that threatened to escape from her throat. Across the portico and down the steps she went into the cool, welcoming darkness of the night.

You don't care about us! Nobody cares about us! Allain's cry echoed in her mind. Where she had wanted to bring happiness and understanding and love, she had instead brought new anguish and new betrayal.

She stumbled to the broad trunk of the oak. The rough bark dug into her hot cheek as the sob fought its way out through her convulsing throat. The tears came on a tumult of harsh, racking sobs.

She wept for Allain and for herself and for the love that brimmed unwanted in her heart. She wept for Jules, for his emptiness and his solitude. She wept for a small girl's hope that love could conquer all.

"April?"

The whisper was so soft she thought she'd imagined it. The hand squeezing her shoulder told her she was wrong. She turned slowly, her sodden lashes blinking away a new rush of tears.

"He's hurting right now," Jules said in a guttural whisper. "He'll get over it."

Her breath shuddered in and out. "I don't think he will. I've hurt him too much."

"He will . . . if you stay."

Stillness encompassed her heart and mind. "What are you saying?"

He shifted restlessly, his hands sliding deep into his pockets. "Allain needs you. Stay here, for him."

For Allain. Not for Jules. Never for him. It was the last defeat, one that wilted April's defenses and left her achingly vulnerable. "I can't, Jules. I wish I could, but . . . I can't. It's best for both of us—"

"And Allain. Is it best for him? He needs you. Will you desert him now, just to make things easier for yourself?"

"If I could stay, I would, Jules!" she

cried. "But I can't! I have to go very soon!"

"Why? What makes it so important that you leave?" Each word was clipped and controlled, as if he fought not to shout.

Because I'm carrying your child! Because you won't allow yourself to love! Because I don't want to hurt anymore or wish anymore! Because in the end, my staying here would hurt all of us. The reasons trembled on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them back as she stared at the strip of blacktop where she would begin her lonely journey.

She turned away from him and hurried to the house before the words poured out of her.

It was a week before Allain was up and about and receptive to April again. It was another week before he was fully recovered. Two weeks during which April began every morning standing in front of her mirror anxiously checking her waist for any betraying thickening. She wanted to go. She wanted to stay. She was paralyzed into inaction. Just one more day, she told herself each morning.

September fled as April should have; October arrived with the same indecision she suffered. The murmuring winds of crisp fall days gently detached yellowing leaves from the sycamore trees.

She would have been gone long before now but a strange thing had happened. Jules had begun watching her with a question in his eyes. He had begun seating her at the table and solicitously, though uncomfortably, inquiring if the meals did not suit her when she was unable to force down more than a few bites. Stranger still, he had begun taking charge of the children in the afternoons so she could rest. The more she tried to avoid him, the more persistently he sought her out. His behavior terrified her. It delighted her. It bound her to Sans Larmes by a silken strand of hope.

She knew she was fortunate in carrying her pregnancy so well. A slight thickening of her waist and a delicate rounding of her abdomen were the only visible signs so far. Once begun, Sam had warned her, the changes would come rapidly. She had a week, two at the most; then her choice would be taken from her.

"Watch me, Uncle Jules!" Yvette demanded from the diving board while Allain made steady laps across the shallow end and April sat on the edge, lazily moving her feet through the cool water.

Jules, water running in rivulets down the bronzed width of his chest, hooked a hand around the stainless steel rail behind the diving board. One knee bent and a fist propped on his hip, he tilted his head to the side and smiled at Yvette.

"I'm watching," he laughed.

"April? Allain? You watchin'?" Yvette hollered, waiting until she had their undivided attention. Plump body jiggling, blond hair streaming, and the red bottom of her swimsuit drooping like the Copper-tone baby's, she raced to the back of the diving board. Pausing to make sure no one's attention had wandered, she hurtled the length of the board and cannonballed into the clear blue water.

Cold drops splattered April's sunwarmed skin as she waited anxiously. Seconds later Yvette popped to the surface like a bobbing cork and began her furious dog-paddling strokes. Her tiny mouth gasping, she reached for April's legs just as Jules sliced through the water in a clean dive.

"Did I do good?" she asked with a sunny smile, blinking away the drops of water pearlting on her lashes.

"You'll be ready for the Olympics in no time!" April said. "Are you sure you aren't part fish?"

"Uh-uh! I'm a girl! I'm not a fish!" She giggled.

"Maybe you're part mermaid." Jules swam over and stopped before them, treading water to stay afloat.

"Swim with me, April!" Yvette said, plunging away.

"Be careful," Jules said. "There's no need for you to overdo."

She stared after him, her curious question growing. Why was he so solicitous of her? Surely he didn't know. He couldn't know. He would have said something, wouldn't he?

Slow, lazy laps carried her across the pool and halfway back. The cramp came unexpectedly, a charley-horse in her calf, bowing her forward, her hands massaging her leg to relieve the pain. She sank and struggled back up, gasping for air before she sank once more.

Jules's strong arm swept around her waist. A powerful sweep pushed them to the top; a one-armed stroke drove them to the side of the pool. He lifted her up and set her gently on the side, then hoisted himself out of the water like a dripping Neptune rising from the sea. He dropped to one knee and caught her leg, roughly massaging her calf while his frown grew darker, more menacing.

"Is it all right now?" he barked.

"Yes," she breathed.

He raked his hand through his hair, sending a spray of water through the air. "Dammit, I told you to be careful! You shouldn't be swimming to begin with! In your condition—"

He stopped suddenly, looking away.

April swallowed hard, struggling to quell the trembling that threatened to leap beyond her control. "What condition is that, Jules?"

His hot eyes stabbed at her, then flicked over to Allain and Yvette. "She's all right. You two head back to the house now."

It was an order, delivered in tones that were not to be disobeyed. April, unable to tear her eyes from him, heard the splash of

water, the wet slap of footsteps, then a silence that scraped her nerves raw.

His eyes met hers once more. "You are carrying my child," he said flatly.

April could feel the color rush from her face. "Whatever gave you such a ridiculous idea?"

"Yvette overheard—"

"Something she didn't understand," April rushed in to explain.

He stepped close, his hands rising to clasp her arms. His eyes searched hers. "You wouldn't lie to me about this, would you? You know I'd marry you, if you were."

Bitterness lent a wry twist to her lips. "Don't worry. Neither of us will be required to make that sacrifice."

She thought she saw a quick flash of pain in his eyes before his lashes dropped like shutters. She wanted to call back the hasty comment, but it was too late. He was backing away with his jaw clenched and his fingers coiling into fists.

"We should get back to the house. Allain and Yvette will be worried about you," he said stiffly.

In the stygian dark of that night April packed her bags as stealthily as a thief. Jules had accepted her denial that morning; whether he would still believe her after a night of sleeping on it was a chance she was not willing to take. She slipped across the hall to give the sleeping Yvette one last kiss. She eased into Allain's room and found him wide awake and waiting.

"I have to go now," she whispered, her hand trembling against his soft black hair.

"I know," he whispered back, sitting up and putting his arms around her.

She had feared tears and recriminations and soulful looks that spoke of betrayal. What she got instead was a hard hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"You aren't going to be gone for long," he said, settling back beneath the covers.

"Uncle Jules will find you and bring you back."

"Allain, you mustn't say that. He—"

"He will, April. He doesn't know it yet, but he loves you just like Yvette and I do. He's afraid, just like I used to be. But you helped him, just like you helped me. He'll know it soon, and he'll bring you home."

And nothing she whispered frantically could convince him otherwise.

By the time Sam's hot-pink Cadillac glided to a halt at the foot of the moonlit oyster-shell drive, April was sobbing uncontrollably. She stumbled out of the shadow of a spreading oak and flung herself against his chest, throwing her arms around his neck.

"Sam! Sam, it's awful!" she wailed into his vest. "Allain . . . Allain . . ." Her breath hitched in and out. "He thinks . . . he thinks Jules will come after me and bring me . . . bring me home."

"Does he?" Sam patted her back in an awkward attempt to comfort her. "Bright boy, that Allain."

Her head snapped up, her eyes wide and horrified. "What are you saying? You know he won't! He'll be glad I'm gone."

"I doubt that, but this is no time to argue. It's the middle of the night, and we have a long drive ahead. I suggest we get on the road."

"Long drive?" she asked alertly.

"You're spending the next few months at my camp on Grand Isle." He tucked her overnight case beneath his arm and hefted her two suitcases.

"Grand Isle?" April whirled to follow him back to the car, stumbling over a clump of weeds. "I don't want to go to Grand Isle. I want—"

"Grand Isle it is, my girl, unless you want to be left standing here like a bride at the altar."

The trunk slammed shut with a sound like the knell of doom. "You wouldn't do

that to me."

"Try me." He swung open the door on the passenger side.

"What difference does it make to you where I go?"

"I'm your doctor. I want you where I can keep an eye on you—for the baby's sake."

The fight suddenly drained from April. "I guess it doesn't matter. One place will be as good as the next. It's just that we . . . we spent a week on Grand Isle. There will be too many memories there for me."

And there were too many memories. Though the summer visitors were gone from the island and the beach was deserted and trackless, April could still hear Yvette's squeals as she chased the frothing waves. She could see Allain limping across the sand and gliding into the water, where he found real freedom from his handicap. She could hear the richness of Jules's laughter and see him rolling through the breakers with Yvette clinging to his back.

As one endless day eased into the next, she listened to the clamor of silence and felt the emptiness of rooms devoid of any life but her own. She walked endless miles, pausing to lift a shell here and to dare the lacy tongue of a wave there. She often stood on a rising dune with the wind whipping her hair while she stared at the barren deck of the Robichaux camp. She walked to the single supermarket to buy food she couldn't eat. She walked to the island library to check out books she couldn't read.

Her faithful companions were ghostly chimeras: Yvette's lighthearted giggle; Allain's reproachful umber eyes; Jules's vehemently denied hunger for love; the formless face of the child yet to come.

On her third Saturday at Grand Isle, April set out for her customary beach

walk, her hands jammed into her pockets. Suddenly her eyes widened. Three figures approached, two small and one . . . Jules! The lock on her emotions shattered, and they stormed through her in a confusing rush of fear and happiness, dismay and joy, trepidation and exultation.

He walked slowly with the wind whipping his hair around his solemn face. He looked thinner than she remembered, his cheeks hollow, dark rings circling his eyes. She soaked the sight of him in through every starved pore. The lean-stretch of his legs. The white shirt peeking through the collar of the black leather jacket molding his wide shoulders. The etched line of his lips, so cautiously betraying nothing of his thoughts. Why was he here? How did he know . . .

"April! April!" Yvette ran toward her. Allain swung along behind his sister, his cane abandoned on the beach.

April stood frozen for a moment, her heart threatening to burst from her chest. She took a single faltering step, then another, and broke into a run. Within steps of Yvette, she fell to her knees and held out her arms.

"April! April!" Yvette ran headlong into her, nearly bowing her over. "I missed you awful, April. Don't go away again! Promise!"

It was a promise she dared not make. Not yet. She hugged Yvette tightly, holding out one arm for Allain, who was wearing an ear-to-ear grin. But her attention was focused on the slow approach of their uncle.

"I told you, didn't I," Allain said, eagerly hugging her. "I told you Uncle Jules would find you and bring you home."

"Yes, yes, you told me."

Jules stopped scant feet away, standing with his hands hanging loosely at his sides. Her eyes locked with his, she struggled to dam the tears that clogged her throat.

"Sam told you I was here?" she asked. He nodded and swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "He said suffering is good for the soul, but enough was enough. He had given me all the time I needed to learn that I . . ." His voice dropped to a thrumming bass. "I couldn't live without you." He paused, then continued quietly, "What he didn't know was that I had learned that a long time ago, and it scared the hell out of me. I wanted to go back to the way I was, but I couldn't. I couldn't live any longer as a shell of a man."

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," she whispered.

"Hurt me?" The hint of a smile tilted his lips. "You punched holes in all my convictions and kicked me clear into nowhere, April. I need your strength and your courage. Now that you've taught me what love is, I want you to share it with me."

Her lips quivered, and the damned-up tears oozed over her lashes and sped down her cheeks.

"Don't cry!" Yvette hugged her. "Don't cry, April! We're gonna marry you now and take you home. Uncle Jules said so! Honest, he did!"

"Jules?" Her eyes questioned and his assured as he knelt before her and took her hand in his.

"She hasn't left me much to say," he began, his voice deep and roughened by emotion, "except, will you marry us, April Jasper?"

Her hand tightly squeezed his. "All of you?"

His smile began slowly with a quiver at the corners of his mouth. "It's a package deal, all or nothing . . . for both of us."

"Then I'll take all. Gladly," she whispered. ♥

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